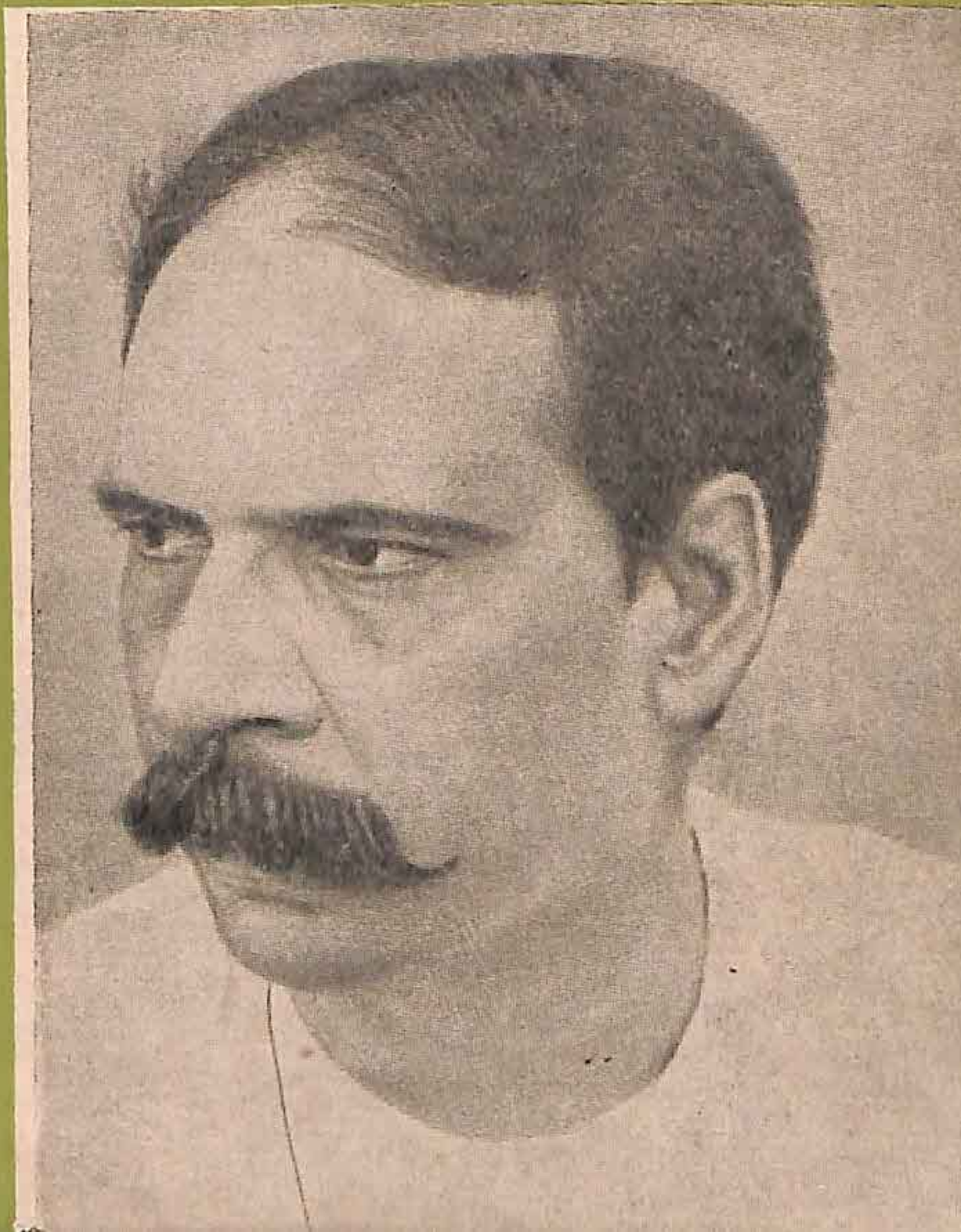




# Pramatha Chaudhuri

Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay

*Makers of  
Indian  
Literature*



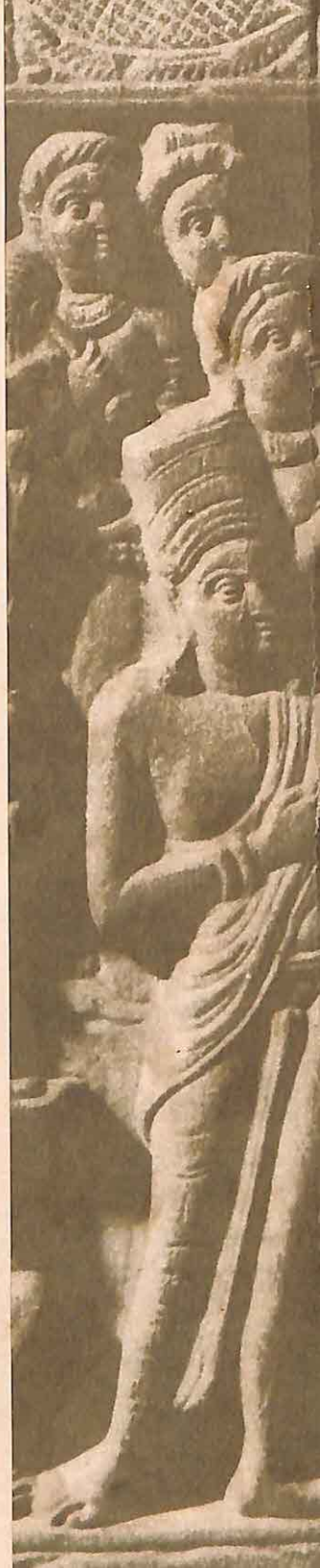


Deeply patriotic and avowedly cosmopolitan, connoisseur of Sanskrit who was almost French intellectually, Pramatha Chaudhuri (1868-1948) would have been at home in the court of Akbar. Says Annadasankar Ray : 'It is not without significance that the pen-name of his choice was Birbal.'

But Bengali meant more to him than Sanskrit. He had faith in the native genius of Bengali. Today if the traditional high Bengali with its stilted Sanskritic elements makes place, more and more, for a form of spoken Bengali, if 'current' Bengali is considered an effective medium of literature in Bengal (including the part that now calls itself East Pakistan)—much of the credit must go to Pramatha Chaudhuri and his magazine *Sabuj Patra*. In *Sabuj Patra* Pramatha Chaudhuri led the way and Rabindranath Tagore followed. 'He gave this magazine its distinctive character', recalled Tagore, 'and paved the way for my literary activities to branch out in new directions.'

Pramatha Chaudhuri was not only a path-finder he was also a creative writer of outstanding abilities—particularly in his essays and fiction.

'He is undoubtedly one of the most influential makers of the Bengali language and literature in the twentieth century,' says the author, Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay, and 'A small attempt has been made in the following pages to illuminate some of the aspects of his great personality, and to evaluate his contribution to Bengali Literature.'







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PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI





The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India. From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D. *Courtesy:* National Museum, New Delhi.





MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

# PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI

*by*

ARUN KUMAR MUKHOPADHYAY



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## Preface

Pramatha Chaudhuri, better known as Birbal, is a great name to be reckoned with in the history of modern Bengali literature. He is undoubtedly one of the most influential makers of the Bengali language and literature in the twentieth century. A small attempt has been made in the following pages to illuminate some of the interesting aspects of his great personality, and to evaluate his contribution to Bengali literature.

This volume on Pramatha Chaudhuri in the series, *Makers of Indian Literature*, has been written at the request of the Sahitya Akademi and I am grateful to them. I would also like to put on record my sense of gratitude to Sri Annada Sankar Ray who readily agreed to contribute an Introduction to this volume and to his wife, Srimati Lila Ray, who looked carefully through the proofs and kindly translated a few of Pramatha Chaudhuri's poems for inclusion in this monograph. My former pupil, Sri Ramendra Narayan Nag, helped me in many ways.

Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay

Department of Bengali  
Calcutta University  
30th September, 1969



# PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI

## An Introduction

### I

Pramatha Chaudhuri ('Birbal') whose birth centenary was celebrated in 1968 was more at home in a *salon* in the French tradition than in the world of books and periodicals. Writing occasionally for the leading Bengali magazines of his day he discovered his true *métier* when he founded and edited the *Sabuj Patra*, a review of life and letters, carrying no advertisements. Its mission was a renewal of Bengal's youth and India's civilisation in harmony with the best that modern Europe stands for. Deeply patriotic, it was at the same time avowedly cosmopolitan.

This highbrow experiment could not possibly have survived without the enthusiastic co-operation of Rabindranath Tagore. He contributed some of his most important writings to it. Chaudhuri himself created a stir with his exquisitely written *Char-Yari Katha*, since translated into English as *Tales of Four Friends* by his wife, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, herself a distinguished member of a distinguished clan, the Tagores of Calcutta. The Chaudhuris of Haripur were also an enlightened family of zemindars. Most of them went abroad to qualify as barristers. Highly anglicised, they were at the same time firmly rooted in the ancient culture of their motherland.

It thus came natural to Pramatha Chaudhuri to build a bridge between East and West. As a widely read intellectual, well-versed in Sanskrit, English, Italian, French and Bengali, with his library containing a multitude of books on history, economics, sociology, philosophy and literature, he was eminently qualified for the task. But he did not foresee that India would be driven to non-co-operate with the British Imperial Power and that the movement would comprise the rejection of modern Western values. The *Sabuj Patra* lost its voice and then its public.

Chaudhuri continued to be a respected figure among the

younger intellectuals and his magazine became a legend. He returned to his old easy-going way of talking brilliantly and writing rarely. The stories which he published once or twice a year marked him out as a master of style, wit, language and form. Essays, always witty and learned, ranging over all aspects of life, sustained his fame as the modern Birbal.

What made him a household word was 'Birbali bhasha' or the language of his prose. It was based on a form of spoken Bengali. Hotly resented fifty years ago as an undesirable innovation, it has since become a powerful rival of the established literary language of Bengal, including the part that now calls itself East Pakistan. His real intention was to build another kind of bridge: between the Sanskrit-proud upper classes and the Prakrit-happy common people. He once confessed to me in all humility that his diction was not natural enough for the general masses.

Like the original Birbal, one of the nine gems of Emperor Akbar's court, the latter-day Birbal will be remembered as one of the nine gems of modern Bengali literature, along with Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Dinabandhu Mitra, Rabindranath Tagore, Dwijendralal Roy, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Kazi Nazrul Islam.

## II

Until the end of the eighteenth century the Bengali language was a language of feeling, not a language of thought. The Bengali intellectuals of those days wrote in Sanskrit. A few wrote in Persian. None of them wrote in Bengali. No prose adequate to the expression of nuances of thought existed in Bengali at that time. Verse was the dominant literary form and verse is the tool of the emotions, of intuition.

Bengali prose came into common use quite suddenly when the printing press was introduced and periodicals of all kinds made their appearance. The spread of educational institutions also contributed to its growing importance. It telescoped centuries of development into as many decades. Prose became the



instrument of modern intellectual expression in the nineteenth century.

Bengali verse evolved or devolved from Sanskrit and Prakrit in the course of a development that was gradual and natural. Bengali prose, although it modelled itself on Sanskrit at the start, was not related to it in the same way. Sanskrit was not the parent but the guru of Bengali prose. Prose was related to it not as a son but as a disciple.

How many actually read Sanskrit prose? What did they read? At most the *Kadambari* or the *Dasakumaracharita*. Only nouns and adjectives were taken from Sanskrit and introduced into Bengali prose. Bengali used its own verbs and its own idioms.

Little by little it became apparent that educated minds were deriving more nourishment from the English writing of the day than from Sanskrit. Europe had become a place of pilgrimage for them. A trip to Europe was like a trip to Mecca or Benares. It meant a kind of fulfilment. For those unfortunates who were unable to make the great journey, the Hindu College, later Presidency College, provided an acceptable substitute. Life for boys unable to study in this institution appeared bleak.

The leadership of Bengali literature passed into the hands of these migratory swans of the spirit. The stuff of their thinking and the trends of their thought derived from English thinkers although the language they used derived from Sanskrit. Old bottles, new wine. They spoke the language of their forefathers while they thought like their contemporaries across the seas. Michael Madhusudan Dutt read the *Iliad* before he wrote *The Death of Meghnad* (*Meghnad Badh*). Before composing his *Life of Krishna* (*Krishna Charitra*) Bankim Chandra Chatterjee read Comte.

Pramatha Chaudhuri was born into and grew to maturity in this intellectual climate. He said in so many words that his self-imposed task was to effect a fusion between modern European civilisation and the ancient civilisation of India. His particular contribution was the impartiality with which he weighed each against the other in the scales of his judgement. The ancient was not given greater importance than the modern nor the Indian than the European. Nationalists looked askance at this balanced assessment and regarded him as lacking in

patriotism. Pramatha Chaudhuri never became popular for this reason. Readers all but ostracized him.

On the other hand he was a favourite with the younger generation because he discarded the high-flown language in general use and wrote a Bengali he took currently from the lips of the people. He objected to the stilted Sanskrit language because he felt it had outlived its usefulness and lost its vitality. It was the ghost of itself. This was audacious in those days, for Bengali in its spoken form had not come into literary use. It was thought that sketches, diaries and a travelogue or two were all that could be appropriately written in it. It could also be used for dialogue in novels and stories or dramas but not in serious studies or essays.

Pramatha Chaudhuri, by his own writing, conclusively proved current Bengali is an effective instrument for all kinds of literature, light, serious, humorous, fantastic, solemn, narratives, essays. In doing this he exposed himself to charges of bump-tiousness and lack of regard for tradition. Rabindranath Tagore teamed up with him and gave him the moral support he required. Tagore had of course made use of current Bengali earlier but there is a marked difference between these early efforts and what he began to do at this time. He stopped writing the Sanskrit literary language altogether. Pramatha Chaudhuri showed the way and Tagore followed.

Pramatha Chaudhuri's Bengali, however, was not used in the way ordinary people used it. Its power of expression was heightened by his thought and his thought stemmed from European sources. He even found it necessary to use a Sanskrit word occasionally. With the greatest humility he protested that though the Bengali he wrote was colloquial, he did not handle it the way it was commonly handled. He was aware he had not been able to effect a change great enough to justify pride. To use the colloquial language in literature in the way it is used by the common people remained a task for the future.

A strange thing happened after Independence. Of their own motion the writers of East Pakistan adopted current Bengali instead of the traditional high Bengali. Perhaps Pramatha Chaudhuri's very genuine love for the language played a part in their choice. Bengali meant more to him than Sanskrit. He



was a Bengali patriot. He had faith in the native genius of Bengal.

Whatever he might have been intellectually, he was emotionally committed to a belief in Bengal's distinct and individual existence. Perhaps it was this which so moved the heart of East Bengal. But this does not necessarily mean that Pramatha Chaudhuri ever dreamt of a Bengal separated from India.

If Pramatha Chaudhuri had a forerunner at all, it was Bharat Chandra Ray, the eighteenth century poet of Bengal. To him Bharat Chandra is what Vidyapati was to Tagore. Bharat Chandra's scintillating, rich and urbane verse foreshadows Pramatha Chaudhuri's prose. Intellectually he was, as we have shown, almost French, and at the same time a Sanskrit connoisseur. He would have been at home in the court of Akbar. It is not without significance that the pen name of his choice was Birbal.

Annada Sankar Ray

The second part of the introduction has been translated from the Bengali by Lila Ray.

## 1. A Short Biographical Sketch

Pramathanath Chaudhuri, known as Pramatha Chaudhuri, is a uniquely illuminating personality in modern Bengali literature. It is amazing how he retained his originality in the all-enveloping era of Rabindranath Tagore. As the editor of *Sabuj Patra* (Green Leaf, 1914) and the mentor of the group that gathered around this journal, Pramatha Chaudhuri left a lasting legacy to Bengali literature. Born on August 7, 1868 in Jessore (now in East Pakistan), he belonged to the famous Chaudhuri family, zemindars of Haripur village in Pabna (now in East Pakistan). His first five years were spent in Haripur and the following ten at Krishnagar in the district of Nadia (West Bengal).

His father, an aristocrat educated in English, was a high ranking official under the British Government. His tours of duty took him to many places in Bengal and Bihar. Pramatha visited them with him. Reminiscences of the first twenty-five years of his youth, from his birth to his trip to England (1868-1893), he recounted in the evening of his life when he was living in seclusion in Tagore's Santiniketan. That miniature autobiography, titled *Atma Katha* (My Own Story), published in 1946, gives us an insight into the formative stages of his career.

Two conspicuous characteristics of the Chaudhuri family set their firm impress on the child Pramatha: their zest and sense of humour and an uninhibited philosophy of life. Game-hunters and musicians co-existed in his family. Pramatha grew up in a paradise of paradoxical forces—the rural and urban, hunting and music, feudalism and free thought. Thus, in his stories, as we wonder at the tyrant landlord, Sitikantha Sinha Thakur, a great lover of wild life and a greater devotee of music, we enjoy at the same time the love-lorn *Tales of Four Friends* (*Char-Yari Katha*).

Speaking of his family, he tells us, "My father, a student of Hindu College, was an uncompromising atheist. For that matter, the entire Chaudhuri family was anti-God.... They were Hindus to the extent that they conformed to local customs and conventions, but Bhakti or piety? No, they had no inkling of it....



The men were manly, the womenfolk—my aunts in particular—were extremely feminine and fair-complexioned. Spruce and spry, they all had a sharp sense of humour.”

The ingredients that went into the making of ‘Birbal’, the pen name used by Pramatha, were all there in the family. From his fifth to the fifteenth year, Pramatha lived at Krishnagar. He waxed eloquent about this period in his *Atma Katha*. He was partial to this small town because “it gave me speech and shaped my mind.” Acknowledging Krishnagar’s contribution to his career he further recalled:

“The moment I arrived at Krishnagar, objects of visual and sensual delight began to enter into my being. I started an intimate acquaintance with the outer world, appreciating its beauty and growing familiar with sights and sounds around me. That was indeed an auspicious introduction to that coveted world which philosophers call the world of aesthetics.”

Pramatha’s education at Krishnagar took place through the study of life and not so much through the medium of books. “Whatever I learnt,” he says, “was mostly acquired unconsciously.” Krishnagar, in his boyhood days, was a peculiar mixture of urban and rural atmosphere. “I cannot gauge to what extent precisely the town and the village had their respective impact but I know for certain that they are both in me.” Krishnagar happened to be the seat of the last independent zemindar of Bengal, Krishna Chandra Ray, whose court-poet, Bharat Chandra Ray, was also the last bard of the “Mangal Kavya” age. The cultivated speech, which was Krishnagar’s own, and the wit and craftsmanship of Bharat Chandra, made a significant contribution to the development of the writer in Pramatha Chaudhuri. In his *Atma Katha*, one notices two very revealing remarks:

1. “Since my very boyhood, I have been a lover of beauty.”
2. “I started singing when I was very young. With my naturally sonorous voice I could correctly reproduce the tunes that fell upon my ears.”

Pramatha inhaled his aesthetical awareness and love of music from the climate of Krishnagar. There was in fact a further development of sensitivity he derived from his mother. “I inherited”, he acknowledged, “my attachment for music

from my mother." Life in Krishnagar for him was fascinating. Whatever he felt and saw through his sense-organs became at once a part of him. He had the rare opportunity of mixing with men of diverse mood and mind. Kite flying was his great hobby; so was rowing and collecting tunes of various kinds. Men of myriad occupations comprised his circle of acquaintances—dope-addicts, drunkards, ironmongers, clay-modellers, carpenters, goldsmiths, oil-pressers and fishermen. They set him free of all religious dogmas. Recalling his Krishnagar days, he wrote further: "Communal consideration never touched us and we thus enjoyed the free air of life."

Between his fifth and thirteenth years he read in as many as six schools, ranging from the village primary *pathshala*, through a Christian missionary institution, to the local collegiate school. In 1881, when Pramatha was in the Entrance class, malaria broke out in an epidemic form at Krishnagar. He fell a victim and remained unconscious for eight days. He was removed, by boat and rail, to his father's semi-urban official station in Bihar. Three months' outing in Arrah brought him back to normal life and he returned—not to Krishnagar—but to Calcutta. This was in 1882, when he was a lad of thirteen. At Arrah, he put aside his school-books and read the novels of Bulwer Lytton and George Eliot and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*.

Pramatha passed the Entrance examination from Hare School, Calcutta, in 1882 with first division marks. He joined the Presidency College for the First Arts course. Scared of a widespread epidemic of dengue fever in Calcutta, he shifted to Krishnagar (October, 1884) where he joined the second year Arts class in Krishnagar College. Unfortunately he had to suspend his studies. Persistent fever necessitated a move to his father in Dinajpur. Back in Krishnagar in 1886, he found his elder brother, Asutosh, just returned from England. The year 1886 was a milestone in Pramatha Chaudhuri's life. His first meeting with Rabindranath who was visiting the Chaudhuris as a friend of Asutosh took place at Krishnagar. It was Asutosh who inspired young Pramatha to learn French. He became an ardent student of French literature and also acquired an absorbing interest in Pre-Raphaelite poets, Rossetti, Swinburne and others.



He became enamoured of Pre-Raphaelite art as well. Returning to Calcutta in 1887, he passed the Arts examination from St Xavier's College with second division proficiency.

Rabindranath was a frequent visitor in the Chaudhuri residence in Mott Lane, Calcutta. With Asutosh Chaudhuri's collaboration, Rabindranath made a selection of his own poems for *Kadi O Komal*. Around this time, Asutosh married Pratibha Devi, a niece of Rabindranath. Thus began Pramatha's relation with the Tagore family. Later, he himself married Indira, the daughter of Rabindranath's elder brother, Satyendranath. "The aesthetic environment of the Tagore house," Pramatha acknowledged, "whetted my appetite for music. To cap it all, there was Rabindranath's personal affection for us."

The Mott Lane house frequently saw Rabindranath and Asutosh reading poems and holding serious discussions. To Pramatha, a curious listener, the attraction was irresistible. "Poetry," his *Atma Katha* tells us, "became meaningful to me. Our pursuit of it was promoted by Rabindranath's presence in person. That created an amazing atmosphere in our family."

Pramatha moved from St Xavier's College back to Presidency College in 1888 and in the following year took the Bachelor's degree with first class Honours in Philosophy. He got his M.A. in English from Presidency College, standing first in the first class. Qualifying for law thereafter, he joined the firm of the solicitor, Ashutosh Dhar as an articled clerk. Earlier, after his B.A. examination, he travelled widely, visiting many places, including Asansol and Darjeeling in Bengal, Sitarampur in Bihar, and Raipur in Madhya Pradesh. During this period he took to Sanskrit and Italian. While in Rajshahi at Lokendranath Palit's home, Pramatha spent hours with Rabindranath and Lokendranath, engrossed in discourses on literature. It is interesting to recall that Rabindranath later chronicled these discussions in his *Panchabhut*.

Pramatha Chaudhuri sailed for England in 1893. He returned three years later as a Barrister-at-Law, having been called to the bar from the Inner Temple. Meanwhile, between 1890 and 1893, four of his writings were published—two original essays and two stories, 'Phuldani' and 'Torquato Tasso'. He wrote 'Ek Tukro Smritikatha' in 1908. The

first piece to appear under the pen name Birbal, 'Kheyal Khata' (A Scrap Book) appeared in *Bharati* magazine in 1902.

*Sabuj Patra* and its editor Pramatha Chaudhuri made their début in 1914. Around the journal developed a group of writers, a fraternity that frequently gathered in Pramatha Chaudhuri's Bright Street residence. A colloquial style in Bengali prose and the dominating element of reason and rationality were the outstanding features of *Sabuj Patra*—a contribution never disputed. The hero of the group was, of course, Birbal alias Pramatha Chaudhuri. It was a kind of *salon* presided over by his wife, Indira Devi, herself a scholar in French and a fine musician.

Birbal held a high place in the literary field for thirty years. The number of his contributions—prose and poetry—on that count was not many. His writings comprised two books of poems, a few collections of short stories and several books of essays. Nevertheless, they made a far-reaching impact on Bengali literature. As a Barrister-at-Law, Chaudhuri practised in the Calcutta High Court but did not take his profession seriously. His habitat was the High Court but his favourite haunt was the book shops. A failure by any conventional yardstick, he dedicated his entire life to reading and writing, and listening to music. The closing years of his life were spent in Santiniketan. He passed away in Calcutta on September 2, 1946.



## 2. Early Writings

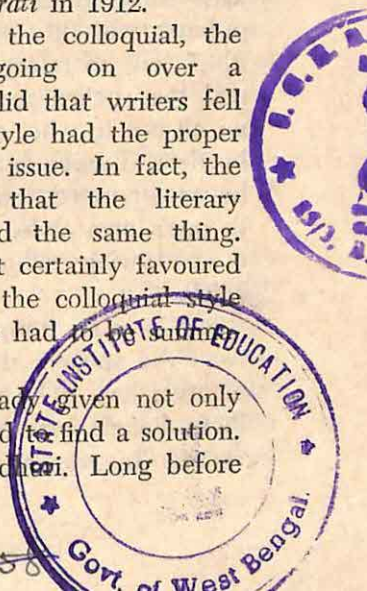
As already mentioned, *Sabuj Patra* bowed into the literary field in 1914. The journal, his *magnum opus*, raised Pramatha Chaudhuri to a rare intellectual height. *Sabuj Patra* unleashed a legendary revolution in Bengali language and thought, the influence of which was generously acknowledged by Rabindranath. Pramatha Chaudhuri's literary production—though limited in pre-*Sabuj Patra* days, gave enough indication of his ability as a writer. This found full scope in *Sabuj Patra*. It would be wrong to assume that the young and budding rebels in literature raised their head with *Sabuj Patra*. The preparation for the *Sabuj Patra* movement, in fact, went on invisibly between 1890 and 1914. Pramatha occasionally appeared in the periodicals *Sadhana* and *Bharati*, run by the Tagore family, and the *Sahitya* of Suresh Chandra Samajpati. Of special interest was the fact that the journals differed ideologically, the first two being Brahmo-influenced and the last, an organ of orthodox Hindus. Conservatives, nevertheless, they all were. Pramatha's Bengali translation of *Etruscan Vase* by the French author Prosper Mérimée appeared in *Sahitya* in 1891. With it was an essay, 'Adim Manavi'. Incidentally, Rabindranath tried to dissuade him from translating Mérimée. Pramatha's rendering of *Carmen*, from French, was never published. For *Sadhana* in 1893, he wrote 'Torquato Tasso Ebang Tanhar Siddha Betaler Kathopokathan,' translated from Italian. 'Jayadeva' (*Bharati*, 1890) was Pramatha's first original prose piece to be printed. Though he followed the conventional style in that essay, his was never a copy book imitation of it. Jayadeva, the 12th century Sanskrit poet whose masterpiece is *Gita Govinda*, receives universal appreciation from educated Indians. To them, Jayadeva is a poet of piety and devotion par excellence and his *Gita Govinda* a book of songs breathing divine love. Pramatha attacked this age-old adulation. He did not accept Jayadeva as a front-rank poet nor would he recognise him as a pious person. Very convincingly he established that it was not art that a discerning eye found in *Gita Govinda*. He found instead a depiction of sensuous delight.

*Bharati* published the piece, although Rabindranath and the editor disagreed with Pramatha's interpretation. It was unquestionably a revolutionary point of view. Pramatha had the courage to say that Jayadeva was a poet not of beauty and divinity but of artfulness and gross sensuousness. Here indeed was the blossoming of his remarkably incisive mind. In later years it fully flowered in the editor of *Sabuj Patra*. All the essays published in this period gave sufficient indication of the emergence of a new literary talent. His first offering as Birbal was 'Kheyal Khata' which appeared in *Bharati* in 1905. His essays avoided the pedantic style. Breezily written, they were light-weight. "The subject may not be serious but it must have truth in it. Still better if embellishment can be added. Worn out thoughts and ideas are as unacceptable as worn coins. My preferences lean to the lighter side of life. Tit-bits, apparently insignificant, are my favourite cup of tea. Literature, I strongly feel, has to be tuned anew to save it from static melodrama. Our country badly needs today a good bath in the sunshine of gaiety and humour—if not for our happiness, for our mental health." These significant comments about 'Kheyal Khata' hold a mirror up to the character of Birbal's writings. 'Banga Bhasa banam Babu Bangla orfe Sadhu Bhasa' (Bengali Language vis à vis Traditional Bengali) and 'Sadhu Bhasa banam Chalit Bhasa' (Book Language versus Colloquial Language) were the two articles of this phase published in *Bharati* in 1912.

The tussle between the traditional and the colloquial, the written and the spoken, had been going on over a century. Differences were so sharp and solid that writers fell into two rival camps. Whether the new style had the proper literary form and character was the basic issue. In fact, the conflict tended to overlook the fact that the literary and the spoken forms were not one and the same thing. All verbs and pronouns as spoken were not certainly favoured by modern writers. The false notion that the colloquial style in literature was essentially a play on verbs had to be summarily corrected.

A host of Bengali prose-writers had already given not only serious thought to this question but had tried to find a solution. The latest in the field was Pramatha Chaudhuri. Long before

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*Sabuj Patra* appeared—sixty years to be precise—the prose writers had been engaged in interesting experiments. *Sabuj Patra* (1914) marked the final phase of a sixty-year-old movement for the introduction of the colloquial style in prose.

One may pertinently question at this point: "What then was Pramatha Chaudhuri's special role in Bengali prose?" The answer is as interesting as it is instantaneous. He injected vitality into Bengali prose—a force imbedded in the very nature of the spoken language. This resulted from his realisation that a language far removed from the way people speak it, loses the throb of life. Pramatha took upon himself the responsibility of breaking all barriers between the writer and the reader. To achieve this end, he dedicated himself to the task in all of its possible ramifications.

In four essays written in this period and published in *Bharati* and *Sahitya*, Pramatha presented his views about the proper style of prose writing. Brief excerpts from them will eloquently establish the cause he valiantly championed.

1. "Bengali language can be revitalized only if our writers avoid the tendency to make it sweet and sonorous. What they should do, instead, is to make it lively and living." ('Malat Samalochana' or Jacket Criticism, 1912).

2. "I love the Bengali language and admire Sanskrit too. But admiration does not necessarily mean blind adherence—at least I do not belong to that school of thought. My writing pulsates with life only when its language is the way I speak it. I will therefore advocate uniformity between the written and the spoken word—disharmony I hate most... We should go all out to whet our language, unloading all the unnecessary burdens. I agree to the incorporation of such expressions as must be incorporated, provided one can appropriately adjust them to one's own style. But thus far and no further. No begging or borrowing either of words or of ideas." ('Kathar Katha', 1902).

3. "It is an irony indeed that the more removed words are from the spoken, the more egoistic our writers become. That paradox has to be removed altogether." ('Banga Bhasa banam Babu Bangla orfe Sadhu Bhasa', 1912).

4. "In respect of the etymology of words, the Bengali

language is very akin to French. I am quoting below an English writer's views on the French language. It will be clear to readers that Latin and French are as interrelated as Sanskrit and Bengali:

With a very few exceptions, every word in the French vocabulary comes straight from Latin. The influence of pre-Roman Celts is almost imperceptible, while the number of words introduced by the Frankish conquerers amounts to no more than a few.

If we substitute 'Bengali' for 'French', 'the primitive tribes' for 'Pre-Roman Celts', 'Sanskrit' for 'Latin' and 'Muslim' for 'Frankish', the above excerpt will be an apt exposition of the Bengali language.

It follows, therefore, that the characteristics of French literature exist in Bengali literature—in fact they ought to exist. The above English critic said further:

French literature is absolutely homogenous. The genius of the French language, descended from a single stock, has triumphed most—in simplicity, in unity, in clarity, and in restraint." ('Sadhu Bhasa *banam* Chalit Bhasa', 1912).

Simplicity, unity, clarity, and restraint were the four outstanding attributes of Pramatha Chaudhuri's 'Birbal' style of writing—an art that thoroughly reoriented Bengali prose. He firmly established the colloquial form in Bengali and, at the same time, discarded as artificial the so-called Sanskritised prose.

'Banga Sahitye Navayug' (A New Era in Bengali Literature), published in 1913 in *Bharati*, deserves special attention in studying Pramatha Chaudhuri's mind of this period.

In this article, published immediately before the appearance of *Sabuj Patra*, Pramatha analysed the character of Bengali literature of the day. The dawn of a new era was vividly visualised. It was clear to him that the religion of the new literature was affinity with the people, not with the rulers. The modern age, Pramatha foresaw, would strive to forge unity between man and man with a view to ushering in a happy



fraternity in a healthy society. Gone were the days of a handful of great men. Instead, a host of lesser celebrities would come to the fore.

"I am not worried," he said, "at the shrinkage of dimensions in modern literary output. I wish it were still more condensed." Pramatha believed that the literature of the day lacked stamina and had therefore lost its grip.

"Must a writer adhere always to reality?" To this question Pramatha had a succinct reply: "For a painter realism is a necessity, the poet has to shun it. In literature, the search is for the beyond, the baffling." Pramatha prescribed for the palpable present a minor position.

Pramatha Chaudhuri's literary work of the pre-*Sabuj Patra* days includes his poems, *Sonnet Panchasat*, a collection of fifty sonnets published in 1913. The second and incidentally the last collection of his poems, *Padacharan*, appeared in 1919, written between his forty-third and forty-eighth years (1911-16).

The unique qualities of Pramatha's short stories and essays are found in his poetry. Pramatha also took up his poet's pen with the defiant distinctiveness so native to his prose, and he brought to bear his sharp sarcasm and subtle satire on life on it too.

Dedicating his *Padacharan* to the poet Satyendranath Datta, he wrote, "Presumptuous though it may appear for a prose writer to intrude into the poetic field, I have ventured nonetheless in the firm belief that, if anything, my poems have rhyme and, may I add, reason as well."

The above claim is also valid for his *Sonnet Panchasat*. The poet Pramatha did indeed succeed in marrying rhyme to reason, the essential traits of poetry and prose respectively.

In a letter written to the poet Amiya Chakravarti on November 6, 1941, Pramatha further elucidated this subject:

"I am fully aware that basically I am a prose writer. It has been an interesting experience, however, to see how one can add to his stock of words by the constant cultivation of rhyming. The process of picking apt words for rhymes may have prompted me to be a poet."

Pramatha Chaudhuri's poetry is true to his character. Never

did he pursue the Tagore path in composing poems. Romantic poems, though the craze of the day, got a good beating from Pramatha.

*Sonnet Panchasat* did not tread the traditional path in the field of poetic literature. In a letter to Pramatha (22nd April 1913), Rabindranath spoke of this collection:

"I am delighted to have read your *Sonnet Panchasat*. I do not recall coming across this type in our Bengali literature. Every single line is worth attention. That proves how sincere you have been. A steel knife, as it were, its sharp-edged smile dazzles. Nowhere do sobs choke or shadows dim it. Only a few blood stains are barely perceptible. You have indeed added a new string of steel to Saraswati's Veena."

The fact that Pramatha stuck fast to the solid ground of reason and reality explains his wanderings into the terse arena of sonnets. One has to keep one's emotions in leash and, at the same time, one must be wide awake to reality. This demanding discipline of sonnet-writing was an attraction Pramatha could not resist. In fact, he acknowledges it in his above-mentioned letter to Amiya Chakravarti:

"If you call my sonnets poetry, I humbly claim that this poetry is unlike Rabindranath's ... I feel that art needs fetters. My sonnets represent largely my interest in experiments. I wonder, therefore, if they will stand the literary test. If some of them do, unhesitatingly I shall attribute my success to the rigorous rules of sonnets. It is likely that my sonnets breathe more artificiality than art."

Pramatha revered Petrarch, the father of sonnets, as his guru. His debt he readily acknowledged in a piece dedicated to him. But did he readily acknowledged in a piece dedicated to him. But did he readily follow the Petrarchan form? The answer would be an instant 'no'. Neither did he follow the Shakespearean pattern. What he did, in fact, was to adopt the usual French form.

As it will hardly be any use analysing his poetry without giving illustrative examples from the original Bengali, only the broad features may be touched upon briefly. Happily for the non-Bengali readers, Lila Ray has translated three poems—typical of his personality and technique. These are given below:



## EXPLANATION

(*terza rima*)

In a new measure I shall now relate  
the history of how I ended as a poet.  
Hear me first and mock me later.

When I was young I felt inclined  
to depict in the pages of literature  
vivid pictures of the world.

I realised I was sure to fail  
to paint my pictures in poetry  
untutored, so I sought a master's help.

My guru had no time to waste!  
So of science and philosophy  
I read more kinds than I could think.

And I partook of the hard bitter fruit  
of some hundred so-called poems.  
A quiet place I built, walled with knowledge.

Putting a stop to my wandering.  
Into the sweetness of my sanctuary  
sand was thrown unexpectedly.

Two golden bracelets entered in  
through the portals of my eyes,  
shedding golden light around.

Confusion reigned in my neat domain.  
The upshot was that, like everybody else,  
I donned the livery of my social state.

The very feel of it induced  
dull lassitude, and ennui;  
it fit my nature very ill.

The world is not the place,  
at least not in Bengal,  
where goodness sits in state.

Only the god with matted hair  
knows how I passed my days,  
playing, willynilly, the worldly game.

My hair silvered, the light within  
dimmed. Striving was stilled.  
In my effort to be worldly  
I lost myself inwardly.  
Greed for outward things  
turned me senile, my mind  
an adolescent boy's.  
Seeking what I had lost  
I turned back, timidly.  
Songs of joy welcomed me  
as I stepped into art's house.  
I forgot my regrets.  
In the forest of my heart  
flowers blossomed once again.  
I was in my second youth.  
The time before me was short,  
so I sat down to make  
songs that would not take long  
and acquired for myself  
a brass Italian cornet.  
It fit my hand  
and the three stops  
easily released  
the life pent up in it.

#### ABOUT MYSELF

My poems will be wholly forgotten  
before many days pass: they're thorny.  
I'm not a pipe-dreaming poet who smokes  
a nozzle with three holy twists in it.  
My fancy is not stabled in the sky.  
When a mood is born in me its shoots  
do not lift flowers into nothingness  
nor does my beloved dangle between earth



and heaven like the triune god, Siva.  
 Not disembodied throbs but living arms  
 my heart needs. Every pink and blue bud  
 shall blossom, cared for, strongly rooted.  
 Kite-flying does not intoxicate me:  
 I don't let the kite string go.

### EVENING RAGA : PURAVI

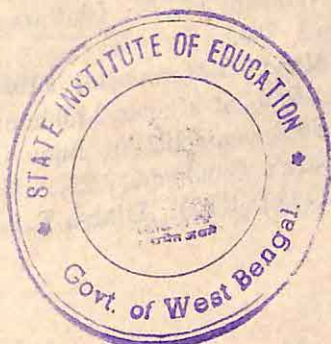
Wan Puravi, indistinct in the darkening shadows,  
 disenchantment is in your eyes. You are listless.  
 Incense scents the clouds of your hair as you  
 contemplate the setting sun. You are passionless.  
 The poignancy of Bhairavi is not yours. As you sing,  
 inattentively, evening descends in my thoughts.  
 Eyes seek the vanishing light and the sun writes  
 it's story in Persian letters of gold. Though  
 I cannot decipher the script I somehow know  
 the dream of the day unites with night.  
 Your languid song is replete with exhaustion's  
 peace and your melancholy casts its spell on me.  
 In Nishapur a poet was your lover.  
 Puravi, make me your slave, your Surdas.

The poems given above prove that Pramatha never turned his face away from the world. On the other hand, he loved belonging to the soil. A poet intensely alive to beauty, he sensed an infinite fragrance rising out of the majestic splendour of our inanimate earth which enriches the aesthetic faculty of the human mind. Very firmly Pramatha maintained that one must love nature to enjoy his art. His admiration for all the five senses gave his poems a sensuous character, and a perennial depth and dimension.

Pramatha's poems sparkle with wit. A rational thinker of the Bernard Shaw-Chesterton type, he had an innate urge to use wit. The bantering attitude of his writings was present

in his poetry as well. Many of his sonnets—‘Balika Badhu’, ‘Bernard Shaw’, ‘Dwijendralal’, ‘Byartha Jiban’, ‘Upadesh’, ‘Atma Katha’, ‘Tajmahal’, for example, prove this point. In ‘Byartha Jiban’, in particular, he declared, “I do not wield my pen to please readers.” This pronouncement provides the key to a proper appraisal of his personality.

It is worth recalling that the middle-aged man sang in his sonnets the swan song of his first youth. It needs recapitulation too that he was neither an escapist nor a pessimist. Nor was he a poet sold to emotion and romanticism. An ardent admirer of this universe and a gay minstrel of the modern mind—that was Pramatha Chaudhuri, in essence.





### 3. Sabuj Patra

*Sabuj Patra* appeared in April 1914 when Pramatha Chaudhuri was 46. It was his maiden venture as an editor and publisher. The formidable vehicle of an independent mind, *Sabuj Patra* became the mouthpiece of a new literary movement which shocked the Bengali literature of the first World War period out of its mental torpor. It was started at the instance of Rabindranath Tagore who, after winning the Nobel Prize, wanted a magazine which would be more cosmopolitan than national, and more liberal than conservative.

Reason and rationality, clarity and cultural finesse, subtle satire and a mundane outlook—these remarkable qualities of Pramatha's writing were boldly reflected in *Sabuj Patra*.

Three outstanding personalities dominated the Bengali literary scene between the first World War and the beginning of the second (1914-1939). They were Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Pramatha Chaudhuri. Those twenty-five years witnessed an interesting war waged by these three for independence of intellect and the rehabilitation of reason. Of the many periodicals of that period, the following deserve special mention with the names of their editors or directors given alongside:

*Sahitya* (1890): Suresh Chandra Samajpati.

*Prabasi* (1901): Ramananda Chatterjee.

*Yamuna* (1909): Phanindranath Pal.

*Bharatvarsha* (1913): Jaladhar Sen.

*Sabuj Patra* (1914): Pramatha Chaudhuri.

*Bharati* (1915): Manilal Gangopadhyay and Saurindramohan Mukhopadhyay (New Series).

*Narayan* (1915): Chittaranjan Das and Bipin Chandra Pal.

*Manasi-O-Marmavani* (1916): Jagadindranath Ray and Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay.

*Bangavani* (1921): Bijoy Chandra Mazumdar.

*Masik Basumati* (1922): Hemendra Prasad Ghosh.

*Kallol* (1923): Dinesh Rajan Das and Gokul Chandra Nag.

*Kali-Kalam* (1926): Premendra Mitra and Sailajananda Mukherjee.

*Vichitra* (1927): Upendranath Gangopadhyay.

*Sanibarar Chithi* (1927): Sajani Kanta Das.

*Parichay* (1931): Sudhindranath Datta.

Three main groups of writers, through the above journals, set the course of Bengali literature during and between the two World Wars. Broadly they can be classified as (1) Conservatives and anti-Rabindranath (*Sahitya*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Narayan*, *Masik Basumati*); (2) Liberal and pro-Rabindranath (*Prabasi*, *Sabuj Patra*, *Bharati*, *Manasi-O-Marmavani*, *Vichitra*); and (3) Romantic and Neo-realist (*Kallol*, *Kali-Kalam*, *Parichay*). Pramatha was no blind partisan of Rabindranath. He had his own independent views. In some respects he gave a new direction to Bengali intellectuals and Tagore followed his lead. Revolt was the keynote of *Sabuj Patra*—the revolt of the young against the old. With a missionary zeal aimed at freeing Bengal from age-old fetters, *Sabuj Patra* started a crusade against the old. With a missionary zeal aimed at freeing of caste and class and idle sentiment and emotion. In this Rabindranath stood behind him.

But crusading does not cover all that *Sabuj Patra* did. Elements more energising accounted for its uniqueness. The *Sabuj Patra* group formed a homogeneous family religiously dedicated to their non-conformist role. Answering a request from Manilal Gangopadhyay to edit a new journal, Rabindranath recommended Pramatha for the job. A literary paper must have a character, Rabindranath asserted in his letter, which will inspire not only readers but writers as well.

The character of *Sabuj Patra* inspired Rabindranath to write a laudatory foreword to Pramatha Chaudhuri's collection of short stories shortly before his death:

"Fatigued and frustrated, when I was keeping away from periodicals, I could not resist Pramatha's call to stand by *Sabuj Patra*. I must confess that the distinctiveness of this journal opened up a new horizon for my writings which no other environment could provide. Pramatha has given Bengali literature a new dimension and style, a commendable contribution



indeed. I do not hesitate to acknowledge my debt to Pramathanath."

Pramatha's method of prose writing is an instance in point. His was a style which scrupulously shunned emotions and evasions, exaggerations and repetitions, loose syntax and unnecessary adjectives, all of which, to him, were sickening. He wanted to eradicate them altogether. And in this effort he was aided by his sharp intellect and urbane culture. The refinement, restraint, wit and polish which radiated from his writings were the outer expressions of his erudite mind.

The above characteristics were not Pramatha's alone. They marked the contributions of the *Sabuj Patra* group as a whole. They wielded their pens with a definite purpose, which was, on the one hand, a war against convention, and, on the other, the reorientation of contemporary Bengali literature in the context of the cultural movements of the western world.

In the very first issue of *Sabuj Patra*, the editor gave an indication of what it was he intended it to be. The manifesto was indeed the keynote of the journal:

"Literature shakes man out of his slumber in relation to the world of reality. If our forerunners can appreciate the spirit of *Sabuj Patra* and join hands with us they will be able to see the mental and moral void in Bengali character and thus render a great service to the nation." (*'Sabuj Patrer Mukhapatra,'* April, 1914).

It was evident from *Sabuj Patra* that Pramatha welcomed European thought currents in Bengali literature. This he clearly stated in the following observation:

"There is no denying the fact that our contact with Europe has given us the ability to shake off our inertia both objective and subjective. The great joy that emanates from this emancipation is the soul force of any creative literature. It does not matter where one picks up the seed of a new idea; what does matter, however, is his ability to cultivate it in his own environment. This is a great lesson Europe has to offer... That we have today turned towards India's hoary past and have set ourselves to glean rich resources from it is unquestionably the outcome of the new educative influence of Europe... The modern European literature may not be akin

to the ancient Indian in character but there is, I feel, an affinity of spirit. The new generation is fortunate that it can gather fruits from both indigenous and foreign sources. To me, the literature that reflects this new age is worth its name, the rest can be rejected as junk. Novelty is not our aim at all. Ours is a mission to mirror meticulously a momentous moment in modern Bengal. Within its limited space and power, *Sabuj Patra* will help writers to express their thoughts concisely but cogently because we believe that literature is not the product of forced regulations but of self-restraint. And the more one is aware of his area, the more disciplined is his writing. *Sabuj Patra* will attempt to earmark that area." (Ibid).

The above extract lucidly explains the tone and tenor of *Sabuj Patra*. It avoided advertisements and effusions alike. Restrained in attitude and word, Pramatha expected the *Sabuj Patra* fraternity to emulate his frugality. Thus the magazine became an epitome of discipline, restraint and rationality.

*Sabuj Patra* (Green Leaf) is indeed a suggestive title for the journal because green symbolises an alert and agile mind. To quote Pramatha Chaudhuri, "The new leaf is green, a wonderful amalgam of aesthetic and spiritual beauty. It is encircled by blue on its right, yellow on its left, violet and red within its eastern and western ends. The green dynamic mind works a wonderful synthesis between the finite and the infinite, the east and the west, reminiscences and reckoning... We look forward to the day when this green ripens to red, the buoyant vibrancy to a full-blooded vigour. This, however, can only occur if we discover our own selves and dedicate them to sublimation. Worshipping the alabaster image of the Goddess of Learning, be it of East or West, is not our cult. Instead we are solemnly placing an earthen pitcher in our temple and planting a budding green leaf in it. Unlike traditional temples, dark and dingy, ours will be a tall and stately structure, allowing profuse air and light to enter from all corners of the globe. Thus the green will flower into its fulness. Above all, people, irrespective of caste, creed and colour, will have easy access to our temple. But there will be no corner for dry leaves." (*Sabuj Patra*, April 1914).

Having no inhibition about ideas or ideologies, Pramatha in-



roduced the European mind into his *magnum opus*. An uncompromising opponent of narrow nationalism or petty provincialism, ignorant rambling in the past or idle dreaming of the future, he firmly stood for the present and the progressive, and was a formidable champion of the gay and the green. *Sabuj Patra* represented that resurgent spirit.

A concrete appraisal of the contributions of *Sabuj Patra* to Bengali literature unfolds an illuminating chapter. It discovered an unprecedented angle of looking at life, gave a new meaning to literature. It created a distinctive style of writing. In a word, it aimed at producing an ennobling of the mind at once erudite and embellished. Essentially an essay-oriented periodical, *Sabuj Patra* started a revolt against the reactionary elements in our life and literature, through penetrating criticism and ironic reviews, and through drinking deep of the fountain of world literature.

Rabindranath was a regular contributor. Known as the *Balaka* phase of his career, Rabindranath's writings to the *Subuj Patra* days were distinctly different from his earlier compositions. They included the *Balaka* poems, the novels *Ghare Baire* and *Chaturanga*, the play *Phalguni* and a sizeable bunch of short stories and essays. These radiated rebellious spirit and a deeply questioning mind. It is interesting to observe that Rabindranath was irretrievably sold to colloquial Bengali.

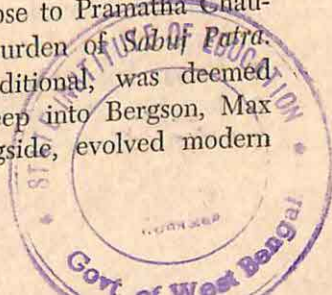
'Bibechana Abibechana' (The Considerate and the Inconsiderate), Rabindranath's article in the maiden issue of *Sabuj Patra*, made a scathing attack on the hypocrisy eating into the vitals of our social system and gave a clarion call to the up-and-coming generation. Through his *Balaka*, *Phalguni* and several short stories, Rabindranath inexorably identified himself with adventurous youth. *Sabuj Patra* directed its devastating campaign against all kinds of moral and social evils. A letter to Pramatha around this time eloquently expressed to what extent Rabindranath was agitated by the stagnation in social and literary spheres. "Our contemporary literature is constantly compromising with vice because it lacks the courage to face the reality. It is a nauseating spectacle indeed. The so-called literary leaders are shirking their responsibility and shrinking away from truth and justice." (*Chithi Patra*—A Bunch of Letters—5th Volume, No. 25).

As Rabindranath unmasked the false and fossilised fabric of society in his short stories, 'Haimanti' and 'Streer Patra', he was violently opposed by *Sahitya* of Suresh Chandra Samajpati and *Narayan* of Chittaranjan Das and Bipin Chandra Pal. Tagore carried on undaunted. The *Balaka* poems sing of eternal youth. The novels, *Ghare Baire* and *Chaturanga*, extol emancipated women. While prevalent perfidy in political preachings were exposed in *Ghare Baire*, *Chaturanga* laid bare deceitful degeneration in religious doctrines. Rabindranath did not rest there. He wrote two revolutionary essays—'Bastab' and 'Loka-hita' (*Sabuj Patra*, 1914)—to refute the criticism of the conservative coterie (*Narayan* and *Sahitya*). They alleged that his writings lacked reality and universalism. 'Streer Patra' and *Ghare Baire* were also significant on two other counts. Social and intellectual thought patterns got a good shake-up and the dimensions of colloquial prose were extended. Thus emerged in Bengali literature a new school in which Rabindranath Tagore joined hands with Pramatha Chaudhuri in *Sabuj Patra*.

Noted among the journal's group of writers were Atul Chandra Gupta, Kiran Sankar Roy, Satish Chandra Ghatak, Satyendranath Bose, Barada Charan Gupta, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Suresh Chandra Chakravarti, Dhurjati Prasad Mukherji, Biswapati Chaudhuri, Harit Krishna Dev, and last but not least the editor's partner-in-life, Indira Devi Chaudhurani. A close scrutiny of these writers would reveal that they stood firmly for a rational intellect free of inhibitions or emotions.

The group of bright 'boys' flocking to literary gatherings at the Bright Street residence of Pramatha Chaudhuri during the first World War formed the nucleus of *Sabuj Patra*. Reminiscing about those days, an ardent *Sabuj Patra* contributor wrote:

"Prāmātha or Sabuj Patrika may be an apt epithet for our group. But that does not tell the whole truth. Book-lovers we all were and we were equally interested in exchanging ideas on world issues. That affinity brought us close to Pramatha Chaudhuri. He tutored us to take up the burden of *Sabuj Patra*. No subject on earth, however non-traditional, was deemed taboo for our discussion. We delved deep into Bergson, Max Planck and Bertrand Russell and, alongside, evolved modern





methods of studying Sanskrit. Fortunately, we escaped social ostracism." (Dhurjati Prasad Mukherji's preface to the new edition of his *Amra-O-Tanhara: They and We.*)

Another member of the group, Atul Chandra Gupta, gave a graphic account of a Bright Street get-together:

"A mutiny of literary minds, our assembly principally discussed Bengali literature, language, its forms and style, but it did something more interesting and intoxicating. Mentally, we criss-crossed the world, collecting material from ancient and modern literature, philosophy, science, linguistics, sociology, economics, history, archaeology and politics. We had specialists in all of these fields. This was a welcome accident because exchanges were meant to interest and inspire everyone irrespective of his area of learning. News of the latest publications reached us through one or another member and we immediately procured copies. Pramatha Chaudhuri had, of course, an edge over all of us in this matter because he collected both the information and the books. They quickly changed hands. We honestly believed that Bengali writers must cultivate their talent in depth in order to equal their counterparts in any corner of the globe. This would develop an affinity of mind and spirit with the great ones of the West in all branches of knowledge. Dedicated we all were to this ambitious programme. Topics were tossed about to inspire and enthral the mind, not to dwarf it to dumbness. We refused to digest any idea, however authoritative, unless it passed the test of our reason—the inescapable influence of Pramatha Chaudhuri. He would go all out to gather knowledge on any subject but would scrupulously avoid accepting anything without an incisive examination." (*Visva Bharati Patrika*, Vol. V, No. 4, 1949).

*Sabuj Patra* unquestionably wrote a new chapter in Bengali essay-writing by its inimitable character. This, it would be pertinent to point out, was not to render social or humanitarian service but to awaken and expand man's spirit and personality.

A mind free of restrictions, with easy access to all avenues of human knowledge, was thus the basic tenet of *Sabuj Patra's* philosophy. It was eloquent in its essays, elegant in its expression, effortless in dialogue and alert in intellect. *Sabuj*

*Patra*, in fact, was much more than a literary magazine. It successfully developed a new dimension of Bengali literature by bringing the modern world into it. With scrupulous care, *Sabuj Patra* not only rejected undisciplined thoughts, garbled language, meandering style, sentimental sobs and emotional outbursts but also waged an incessant war against them. An impeccable savant and pragmatist, Pramatha Chaudhuri pioneered an epoch-making movement in Bengali literature.



#### 4. Tales of Four Friends

As a story-teller, Pramatha Chaudhuri is at his best in *Char-Yari Katha* or Tales of Four Friends. With its publication in 1916, he was acclaimed a first-rate writer of short stories. In four tales knit together, he presents four friends caught in a club room in a piquant situation. A fierce storm was brewing on the horizon making the atmosphere silent and sombre. The four tipsy friends, their gaze glued to the hushed nocturnal sky, start recounting their romantic experiences. The locale and the environment unite to create an atmosphere of tense expectancy and apprehension. The underlying affinity is rooted deep in the mental make-up of the romantic narrators. An inexorable attraction for beauty binds the four middle-aged men together.

Pramatha's art and artifice in story-telling are evident in *Char-Yari Katha*. The presentation is a rare treat, the execution superb in its originality. All the four episodes emanate from the world of memories, in some cases factual, in others fictitious. Sen, for instance, has a truthful tale to tell but it appears wholly unreal while Sitesh, presenting an imaginary anecdote, gives it an air of credibility. Both are, however, fully aware of this folly. The last story-teller, Roy, wavers between fact and fiction, never sure if his encounter was an actual fact or a fantasy. One wonders what Pramatha Chaudhuri's concepts of truth and travesty of fact were. A study in depth, however, reveals that *Char-Yari Katha* weaves a yarn which is neither fact nor fiction, but a fusion of both.

Short synopses of the stories elucidate the point. The first tale is told by Sen. On a full moon night Sen, a youth, was walking along the bank of the Ganga in Calcutta. Unexpectedly he encountered an exquisitely beautiful English-woman who was standing there drenched in the enchanting glow of the moon. The dazzled young man instantly fell in love with her and she too gave him a meaning smile. In no time, unfortunately, the spell was broken. The lady, a lunatic, had escaped from an asylum. Her pitiful laugh and agonising screams when she was dragged away demolished Sen's dream.

To quote Sen, "From that moment the eternal feminine was lost to me forever but I discovered my own self."

The second tale is told by Sitesh. Unlike Sen, Sitesh searched for the eternal feminine in many souls. Like Sen, however, he failed to find it anywhere. While drifting on a drizzling evening in London, Sitesh came across a bewitching English girl in a second-hand book shop. Loving her at the very first sight, he begged for a second meeting. The girl put her card in his pocket book and slipped away, making him promise that he would not read it for five minutes. Five minutes later Sitesh took the card out to discover that the girl had pinched his guineas. Sitesh's lady love had vanished by that time.

The third tale is told by Somnath. To be cured of his insomnia, Somnath went for a change of climate to a small town in England's West Coast. In the hotel he met a charming young girl—calm and compassionate—whom he named 'Tarini', the saviour, and endearingly called her 'Rini'. Somnath fell for Rini and the affair went on for a year or so. She too showed she cared for him. It turned out eventually that Rini was using him as a tool to make her fiancé George jealous so that the latter would hasten their marriage. The tantalising beauty thus achieved her own object by playing with two poor souls.

The fourth tale is told by Roy. Roy's realisation, a purely personal one, was different from the three others. Anne, a maid-servant in the house where Roy lived as a paying guest in London, won his admiration as an exceptionally sincere and dedicated attendant. Little did Roy realise during his sojourn that Anne was in love with him. As she never gave any indication of it, courtesy restrained Roy from even looking into her face. After a lapse of ten long years, Anne disclosed her love for Roy in a long-distance call to Calcutta. And this mysterious message came not from London but from the other world, precisely at the moment when Anne met with her death on the battlefield in France while serving as a nurse.

The most uncommon quality of Pramatha's short stories is their author's keen eye for aesthetic finesse. That quality is abounding in *Char-Yari Katha*. Apparently an uncompromising critic, Pramatha was basically an ardent enthusiast. He believed



that a creative artist ranks higher than an essayist. A model work of art in any field of study, according to Pramatha, proceeds from man's awakened mind. It usually tends to be placid and dormant, and needs a severe jolt now and again. Pramatha's pen provided that shock. His readers wakened out of their routine-stunted existence into a world of beauty, a real world. *Char-Yari Katha* is a sparkling gem.

Our conventional convictions and ordinary conceptions of romantic love get a good shake in the unromantic tales of four friends. Although it might lead one to believe that Pramatha really wanted to uproot all existing ideas about love and romanticism, the fact was entirely otherwise. Never an opponent of amorous youth, Pramatha was essentially wedded to aesthetic excellence. This was best borne out by the *Tales of Four Friends*.

Here is Annada Sankar Ray on *Char-Yari Katha*:

"The eternal aroma of a romantic mind is at the heart of *Char-Yari Katha*. It is at once pleasant and poignant. Another *Char-Yari Katha* cannot be had for the asking. One cannot just walk back into youth and folly. Indeed, it is the swan song of second youth longing for the earlier one." (*Birbal* by Annada Sankar Ray, 1941.)

There cannot be a better commentary on *Char-Yari Katha* than this observation. The raging storm and the ominous atmosphere of the night lent a significant backdrop to the fabulous tales. The four friends found their usual selves broken to pieces and out of the devastation appeared their lost young hearts—hearts that had fondly fostered their sweet sorrowful moments in search for beauty. None of the four emotional souls reached the desired end. Rather their experiences, throwing all conventional notions of youthful love to the four winds, proved once again the perennial fact that man cannot escape surrendering his pious and noble intentions to a more powerful force. And that force is none other than fate.

The search for beauty constitutes the crux of *Char-Yari Katha* and indeed of Pramatha Chaudhuri's creed. Beauty in its perfection is outside the range of human intellect and *Char-Yari Katha* is thus a dreamy drama.

The four tales of *Char-Yari Katha* are independent of each

other, each rounded out in itself. Still an intended but invisible tie binds them together. All four started out to look for the 'Eternal Feminine' only to return with four different sad experiences. The objects of their love were interestingly unusual in one respect or other. The first one, a lunatic, was wholly an abnormal being, the strange behaviour of the second disclosed a part of her adventurous nature, the third was a puzzling person whom it was impossible to win in love, and the fourth, an apparition, conferred her love after death.

One cannot but admire the artistic brilliance of the four tales which fixes into a single frame, as it were, the awareness of beauty and of fate.

Pramatha Chaudhuri's wife, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, was a gifted writer in her own right. Her English rendering of *Char-Yari Katha*, published in June 1944, was thus reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

"*Tales of Four Friends* is an Indian's attempt to write the counterpart of such tales as Mr Kipling's *Without Benefit of Clergy* and Pierre Loti's romantic accounts of exotic amours. We need only add that Mr. Chaudhuri's style is worthy of the high reputation his magazine has won as a record of all that is best in contemporary Bengali literature."

The following excerpts from Mrs. Chaudhuri's translation—cunning stories of Sen and Somnath—prove the quality of *Char-Yari Katha* and the unique artistry of its author's storytelling.

First comes the story of Sen:

"It was the night of the full moon. Sen reached the banks of the river Ganga in course of his solitary walk. It was nearly 11 P.M. Sen felt that on such a moonlit fairy night he should meet a Miranda, a Desdemona, a Beatrice or a Tessa—whose touch would revive him, arouse him and make him immortal. He distinctly saw in his mind's eye the embodiment of his long-wished-for eternal feminine, waiting for him at a distance.

"When Sen came to the Red Road, walking straight on like a man in his sleep, he saw a shadowy form pacing up and down, some distance ahead. Then he noticed that form occupying a bench."



Sen continued his story:

"Coming closer, I found that the occupant of the bench was an English girl, in the first bloom of youth and extraordinarily beautiful. She was not made of mortal clay,—she was moonlight incarnate! I stopped startled before her, and gazed at her with wide-open eyes. She also looked at me intently. When my eyes met hers, I found they were shining brightly in the light; I had never seen such brilliance in human eyes before. That light was not of the stars, nor of the moon, nor of the sun—but of lightning! That light made the moonlight brighter still, and sent an electric wave through it. The astral body of the universe became visible to me on that day, for an instant, and in that moment this material earth became instinct with life and spirit.... My body and mind, transfused into one, had taken shape in a single desire,—the desire of loving, and being loved in return. My enchanted mind had lost its intelligence and reason.

"After a while the girl, seeing me standing thus stock still, looked at me and smiled. Encouraged by that smile, I went and sat by her side on the bench, not quite close, but at a little distance. We were both silent. I hardly say that I was dreaming then with open eyes and in that land of dreams there was no sound, only silent feeling.... There was the hand of providence in this meeting of ours. It had its beginning in the eternal past, and would never end in the eternal future. As soon as I discovered this truth, I turned towards my companion. The eyes which I had seen glittering like diamonds a little while ago, now seemed to glow as softly as sapphires, and had become tinged through and through with a deep sadness. I had never seen such a sad and wistful look in human eyes before. It made my heart melt within me and overflow; gently I drew one hand of hers within my tender clasp; at the touch of that hand a tremor passed through my body, a wave of joy rushed through my mind. With closed eyes I enjoyed this new found surge of emotion welling up within me.

"Suddenly she snatched away her hand, and stood up. I saw that she was trembling, and her face was pale with fear."

Then Sen discovered that his lady love was mad, absolutely stark raving mad; she must have escaped from the lunatic asylum

in an unguarded moment, and the warders were now out to take her back.

Thus ended Sen's adventure for the Eternal Feminine.

Let us discuss Somnath's story. Once Somnath went to Ilfracombe on the west coast of England for a change under medical advice. There he met a pretty English girl whom he called 'Rini'. The girl claimed that she saved him from the clutches of old maids, hence his saviour, or 'Tarini' (in Bengali), briefly 'Rini'.

Somnath admitted that Rini had picked him up at the sea-shore hotel and mesmerised him.

Then Somnath went on to narrate his story:

"Suffice it to say that Rini held the invisible strings of my mind in her ten fingers like this, and made it dance like a puppet. I don't know whether the sentiment she had aroused in my mind can be called love; all I know is that in that feeling there was pride and pique and anger and obstinacy, side by side with the fourfold emotions of tenderness, love, devotion and friendship. The only thing there wasn't even a trace of, was any kind of carnal passion. She could run her fingers over the flats and sharps of my mind, and bring out any tune she liked and whenever she liked. The notes were extra-flat or extra-sharp, according to her touch....

"For twelve months I played hide and seek with this shadow (i.e. Rini), day and night. There was no pleasure in this game, yet I hadn't the strength to stop it. Just as those who suffer from insomnia keep all the more awake, the more they try to sleep—so the more I tried to give up playing, the more deeply did I become entangled in the game. To tell you the truth, I was not eager to put an end to it because in this new mental unrest of mine, I perceived the pungent flavour of a new life.

"I am not ashamed to confess that I failed to conquer Rini's heart, in spite of my strenuous efforts to do so; because it is impossible for anyone to grasp the sky or the air in the hollow of one's hand."

At last Somnath proposed to her but Rini didn't readily agree to marry him. She asked whether he was willing to become a Roman Catholic. Somnath was perplexed and wanted one night to reply. Rini consented and saw him off at the station.



Somnath saw his rival, George, waiting for her. Next morning Somnath received a letter from Rini.

The letter ran thus:

"What I have been wanting for a year has happened today. George has proposed to me, and of course I have accepted him. Thanks for this are specially due to you. Because men like George are as eager to get hold of women like me, as they are afraid to marry us. That's why they take so long to make up their minds they never get made up, unless we help them a little. To them love means jealousy, the more jealousy they feel, the more they think themselves in love. George got excited as soon as he saw you at the station, and when he heard that you were to give an answer to a question of mine to-morrow, he settled our marriage without further delay. For this I shall remain eternally grateful to you and hope you shall remain grateful to me also. Because you will realise later what a mad thing you were about to do. Today I have really become your saviour.

"My last request to you is—don't ever try to see me again."

Thus ended Somnath's quest for the Eternal Feminine.

So we realise that all the four friends' experiences in love ended on a note of pathos. But they were not sorry as they realised they were not in vain. *Tales of Four Friends* is really a creation of lasting beauty.

## 5. Social and Political Writings

British rule brought Europe close to India in the last century, the contact producing many phenomena, the effects of which seriously agitated all Indian thinkers. The leaders of Bengal's renaissance movement tried to select from European thought what appeared to them congenial to Indian genius. Prominent among them were Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Devendranath Tagore, Akshoy Kumar Dutta, Rajnarayan Bose, Sivanath Shastri, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Romesh Chunder Dutt, Rajendralal Mitra, Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Pramatha Chaudhuri also made his own contribution in this sphere.

Giving his own impression about Europe's contribution to India, Pramatha Chaudhuri wrote:

"Europe has awakened our mind. This is a welcome and enduring aspect of our contact. Whatever impact it has made on our behavioural pattern is doubtless superficial and is a passing phase. Fortunately, a good section among us is fully alive to this imported element in our society." (*Tel Nun Lakri*, 1905.)

The above comment helps us to a proper appreciation of his social and political essays covering twenty-five years. He never quite ignored the contributions of the nineteenth century intellectuals, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in particular. But he did certainly propagate the philosophy of the free mind and in doing so enormously enriched the Indian heritage with the thought of vibrant Europe. A non-believer in the synthesis of the old and the new, Pramatha Chaudhuri wanted to underline the sharp difference between the two. And he did it with great success. He went to the soul of Western civilization and was not enamoured of its exterior. The following quotation from his writing establishes this fact:

"In all areas of our contact with Europe—politics, sociology, religion or literature—we observe its body, not its mind. The result is we get nothing. It is the soul that shapes the body and it should, therefore, be worth while to embrace the soul of European civilization." (*Tarjama*, 1913).



Pramatha continues:

"To fight inertia is indeed the challenge of our life. The more stony the old system is, the more agility is required from the awakened mind. The vitality of a society is reflected in the dynamism with which it fights static elements. True, many institutions may tumble down in the process but the ones that will grow will be of greater value to society. Bengalis should not, therefore, think in terms of a fusion between the old order and the new; on the contrary, a conclusive showdown is what they should work for." ('Nutan O Puratan,' 1914.)

Pramatha's political thought is as clear as it is unconventional. In many instances he proved his originality. The suggestion that geographical situation or blood tradition accounted for the superiority of a nation was rejected by him. His modernism in political and social thinking shows in this. He would rather give the palm to a humanism which he thus elaborates:

"Real Europe is neither in its soil nor in its body because human civilisation is the handiwork not of geography but of history, not of its physique but of its mind." ('Europiya Sabhyata Bastu Ki P', 1930.)

He believed that human civilization is one and indivisible. It was also his conviction that civilization grew out of man's uninhibited expression of his own self. The decadence of Europe during the first World War substantiated his theory. He said:

"It is not geography but history that has created Europe. In other words the foundation of European civilization rests on its moral and intellectual traditions." (Ibid.)

European culture, Pramatha propounded, comprises three basic elements: the Greek, the Roman and the Christian. While the first two gave it realism and legalism, the last one gave it idealism. The synthesis, which for quite some time covered Europeans with glory and grandeur, did not, unfortunately, last long. The Renaissance years saw Greek science, Christian ideals and Roman politics dissociating from each other. The result was that civilization in Europe lost its balance. The process went unnoticed by Europeans until political materialism took complete possession of their minds,

alienating them altogether from Greek intellect and Christian religious integrity. The proverbial last straw was provided by the first World War. It broke completely the European camel's back.

It was Pramatha, again, who saw, in 1930, that European civilization has an undying element in it which makes it a perennially vibrant and live force. That element is Greek philosophy and literature. Even to this day it is a stimulating factor in any growing culture. The Roman Empire is no more, but its legal testament still guides European life.

Christian spirituality, likewise, has been overcome by political materialism but a sense of morality protects Europe. This analysis of the elements and the edifice of European life and culture, gave him the realisation that human civilization is an unbreakable entity. A universalist in his political views, Pramatha looked at man as a citizen of the world who is not limited by his geographical environment. The moral and spiritual virtues in human life, he pointed out, are no longer Europe's monopoly; humanity, as such, has open access to them. He observed in this connection:

"The democratic call in Europe is neither derived from Greek philosophy nor from the principles of science. It was initiated by Jesus Christ... As Greek philosophy and Roman laws do not exclusively belong to these two countries, so is science in respect of Europe. In fact, entire humanity can share these freely and Europe will eventually cease to have supremacy in these fields." ('Europiya Sabhyata Bastu Ki?', 1930.)

The belief that a new order would emerge out of the chaos of the first World War encouraged Pramatha to declare that German militarism, devoid of any moral base, was destined to die out, leaving the way open for the freedom of human society and restoration of its dignity. ('Bartaman Sabhyata *banam* Bartaman Juddha', 1914.)

One should not, however, hasten to infer that Pramatha decried patriotism. To him, patriotism was not a narrow concept walled in on all sides by a parochial nationalism. This view he elaborated in his discussion on national literature:

"The study of our own literature alone is bound to stifle



our outlook. It can never be conducive to the development of our mind....A nation, however great, works within a very limited mental sphere which must be broken down by the inflow of foreign ideas and thoughts. The world of mind may have different manifestations in different countries but it has essentially a universal element. The moment this truth is realised, artificial barriers will collapse." ('Banglar Bhabisyat,' 1917.)

Pramatha denounced rabid nationalism not because it was a legacy of the nineteenth century nor because it had a foreign flavour in it. Here, again, his judgment was singularly original. Analysing the nature of nationalism Pramatha observed:

"What passes for patriotism is in reality a bias for one's own race since man, in loving his country, is, in fact, expressing his attachment to the people of the soil." ('Bengali Patriotism,' 1920.)

Pramatha did not consider a provincial outlook narrow or reprehensible. On the contrary, he felt such a feeling tended to express and liberate the national character. At the same time he urged that Bengalis should exert themselves to associate with the thought-currents of the contemporary world. A universalist in his attitude, Pramatha thus parted company with the philosophy of his predecessor, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Indeed, he was the kind of a world-conscious thinker who mirrored the culture of the entire world in himself.

Pramatha Chaudhuri's estimate of the Bengali mind and character was supremely significant:

"Only Bengal could, in India, produce a Bankim Chandra or a Rabindranath. This establishes the truth that in the realm of thought we Bengalis live on a distinctly different level from other people of this sub-continent. An insatiable hunger for knowledge and a thirst for poetic nectar have urged us to dive deep into European literature and science. Thus we have brought the world closer to us. No other people in India has been able to achieve that." (Ibid.) It is thus clear that, as a thinker, Pramatha was a citizen of the world in whose vision Bengal did not belong to the past nor the present but shadowed

forth the future. In his own words:

"The land I love is a Bengal not of to-day, nor of yesterday but one in the womb of futurity—the Bengal that is being shaped by our thoughts and deeds. Bengali patriotism is thus an integral part of Indian nationalism." (Ibid.)

*Rayater Katha* (The Cause of the Peasants, 1920), an elaborate article, gives a graphic picture of Pramatha Chaudhuri's political and economic views.

Though critics were hoarse in pin-pointing the symbols of the new age, there was no dispute about two of them—rationalism and humanism. The latter emphasized that men, irrespective of their religion, race or sex, were all equal. This was the theme of all leading thinkers of the modern generation. Exponents of this new gospel were Rammohun Roy, Akshoy Kumar Datta and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, all of whom wanted to see truth triumph in the fields of knowledge and daily life. They did not accept dogmatically the preachings of the past. The rejuvenated Bengal they brought into being offered an excellent starting point for Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who, treading in the foot-steps of his forerunners, held aloft the supreme need for a rational intellect and was thus acclaimed as an intellectual of all times. With his robust conviction and clarity of thought Bankim Chandra engaged himself in finding the economic forces affecting Bengal's life as his 'Bangadesher Krishak' (Peasants of Bengal, 1876) so eloquently testified.

The problems of the peasantry occupied the thoughts of men like Rammohun Roy, Romesh Chunder Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Dinabandhu Mitra, Nabin Chandra Sen and Rabindranath Tagore. Pramatha Chaudhuri was a notable addition. In his preface to *Rayater Katha*, he firmly stated that it was perfectly within the province of a serious writer to explore the condition of the tillers of the soil. Indeed, no littérateur worth his name could shirk this responsibility. Bengal provides several examples to support this view of Pramatha's. Notable among these are, besides his own *Rayater Katha*, Bankim Chandra's 'Bangadesher Krishak' and *Samya* (Equality), and Rabindranath's *Kalantar* (Changing Times) and *Pallipra-kriti* (The Character of the Village).



It was remarkable of Pramatha Chaudhuri, himself a zemindar, to declare unequivocally in his *Rayater Katha* that the salvation of our country lies in the emancipation of the agriculturists. He went further to assert that the ownership of the land must go to the tillers of the soil. A masterly account of the Ten-Year Settlement of 1879 and Permanent Settlement of 1793 made his essay not only a great historical document but an inspiring piece of literature as well. The following extract from *Rayater Katha* is worth quoting in this connection:

"In rebuilding our nation, the fact that Bengal's economy is essentially agricultural must never be forgotten because on the improvement of our land depends the prosperity of our people. Manuring the land alone while ignoring the human element—the agriculturists, their mind and body—cannot produce any beneficial result."

The concluding portion of *Rayater Katha* written in 1920 revealed his remarkable foresight about the shape of things to come fifty years after the impact of the first World War and the Russian Revolution. It also, incidentally, demonstrates his keen awareness of our social and economic problems:

"My earnest appeal goes out to the landlords not to stand in the way of peasants gaining their demands legally acknowledged. Let these unfortunate agriculturists breathe the freedom denied so far to them. To make an unerring guess of the future is indeed difficult but visible indications are that the foundations of today's social and political doctrines have been shaken to the bottom. It would be wise, therefore, to start refashioning our system to forestall the calamity of seeing our hearth and home swept away by the onrush of a tremendous cyclone."

What a true prophet Pramatha Chaudhuri has proved to be!

Apart from his contributions to *Sabuj Patra* he also wrote for *Bijali*, a political weekly run by ex-revolutionaries. In it he criticised the Non-Co-operation Movement and the setback it caused to social and educational progress. Those articles were brilliantly written but his voice was lost in the din of the national upsurge. The *Bijali* articles are now no longer available.

## 6. Short Stories

The first two phases of Pramatha Chaudhuri as a story-writer have been reviewed in Chapters 2 and 4.

In 1891, Pramatha Chaudhuri had read a paper on 'Short Stories' at a group meeting convened by Suresh Chandra Samajpati, editor of *Sahitya*. This occasioned his story 'Phuldani', a translation from the French writer Prosper Merimée (*Sahitya*, 1891), which was followed, seven years later, by 'Prabas Smriti' published in *Bharati* in 1898. However, it was not until 1916 that Pramatha Chaudhuri appeared as a full-blown writer of short stories. *Char-Yari Katha* was a product of this period.

It was the search for the spirit of the short story that initially inspired him to write them. That question, amazingly enough, stuck to him even in his later days as was evident in the short stories of his mature years. These stories represent the third and fourth phases of his story-telling and are in the collections listed below:

*Ahuti* (1919), *Nil Lohit* (1932), *Nil Lohiter Adi Prem* (1934), *Ghosaler Tri-katha* (1937), *Anukatha Saptak* (1939), *Galpa Sangraha* (1941) and its enlarged second edition (1968).

The short stories Pramatha produced in the course of twenty-five years (1916-1941) were literary masterpieces in that they shunned the trodden track of contemporary practice. Superb creations, they stand apart in their quest for a new pattern and in their perennial conflict between fact and fiction. About his sonnets, Pramatha said that he never composed them with an eye on his audience. His essays, he indicated, were meant to delight his readers, not to please them. In his short stories, the above claims are further confirmed. Grave matters were, therefore, not his subject, nor did he attempt to preach social justice. In fact, Pramatha did not claim that his short stories were ever aimed at educating people or to carry a message to them in a light vein. What he believed in was that "literature must wake men up from their mental stagnation and make them alive to reality." ('Sabuj Patrer Mukhapatra', 1914). This he successfully did through his short



stories, the inescapable impact of which kept his readers always alert and interested.

Pramatha evolved a new style in short story writing. While one person narrates the anecdote, others listen to him, thereby affirming the age-old tradition that a story is meant more to be heard than to be read. That was, by and large, his formula. He occasionally departed from it by addressing readers directly. Interestingly enough, the listeners are never mute. They often interrupt with tit-bits, offer comments and may sometimes create embarrassing situations, all of which, however, are the writer's ingenious way of leading the story to its artistic fruition.

In 'Galpa Lekha' (1925), through the conversation between a story-teller husband and his wife, Pramatha discussed the art of story-writing. A fascinating story results, which, fundamentally, is a dialogue of differing views. The following excerpts from the story will make interesting reading:

- Life cannot be contained in a tale, not to speak of a short story. Incidents of a life, major and minor, make a story.
- Tragedies of life turn into comedies in the inept hands of story-tellers like you. A naive person breaks into tears while a discerning reader feels sorry for you.
- An English story can be turned into a real Bengali form with felicity, but to do this the writer must know how to change its content and colour.
- A story is nothing but a fairy tale.... But with a difference. Fairy tales are unalloyed impossibilities and the readers are fully aware of the fact. In novels and dramas, however, they accept incidents and characters as probable.
- The ingredients of a story are not what actually happens but what one wishes to happen.

From the above excerpts we get a good glimpse of Pramatha's concept of composing stories. Short stories, to him, are true episodes in the world of imagination. The art of telling tales through conversation between the narrator and the listeners, Pramatha used with an inimitable skill. The story-tellers are characters, each of them with a distinctive personality of his own. Three such outstanding story-tellers are Ghosal, Nil Lohit and

Sarada Dada. All of them are artists par excellence, highly accomplished in the spinning of yarns.

Anyone questioning the authenticity of their anecdotes would find an answer in Pramatha's story, 'Galpa Lekha'. Listeners to Ghosal's 'Pharmayesi Galpa' could not care less for art and beauty. Sticklers for truth, they must conform to the accepted norms of society. What they do not realize is that the truth of an artistic work is certainly different from the truth of the material world. An uncompromising architect of his technique, Pramatha never sacrificed artistic truth at the altar of stern reality. Nil Lohit enjoyed the unenviable reputation of being an accomplished liar. Pramatha pays him the compliment: "Whatever fell from Nil Lohit's lips were facts of the realm of fiction." The autobiographical tales of Nil Lohit, Pramatha further said, "though abounding in myths, evinced nonetheless that he possessed a soul free of all fetters". Sarada Dada, rejected by wise men as a pedlar of untruths, was praised by Pramatha because he was a gifted story-teller, with the rare ability to drive his point convincingly home, who could bravely assert that all his legends emanated from his own experience. The myth-maker created by Pramatha lived in the realm of beauty. Their encounters were facts of the world of fantasy.

In his short stories Pramatha was not concerned with reality as such. He loved to roam in the realm of aesthetics. Ghosal, Nil Lohit and Sarada Dada were living witnesses. With one set of characters—the listeners—firmly rooted in the material world, facing another set—the denizens of the dream world, telling tales simulating the credible, Pramatha held the scales even—the one of fact and the other of fantasy.

The listeners in Pramatha's short stories have a significant role. At one time, they form the bridge between the real and the unreal, at another they step aside to indicate the gulf in between. Ghosal and Nil Lohit have to cater to this kind. In *Char-Yari Katha*, however, it is the listeners who draw stories from the dreamland. In other situations as in 'Sada Galpa' and 'Chhota Galpa' the listener's role ends as soon as the tales get into their stride.

Nil Lohit and Ghosal possess uncommon personalities compared to the commoners who are passive participants.



By pitting clever and colourful characters like Nil Lohit and Ghosal against a crowd absolutely alien to the elegance of an enriched life, Pramatha effected a scathing satire on the inert, ignoble and ignorant society in which the average with their limited experience rejoice at the plight of ambitious people forsaken by fate. With his irony and innuendo, Pramatha turned tragedies into tragi-comedies. His short stories did not exceed forty in number.

Three instances illustrate Birbal's mastery in depicting the underlying tragedies of his short stories. Srimati, the heroine of 'Ekti Sada Galpa' is not only young and pretty but is also unmatched in her education. Her father Shyamlal is considered an outcaste in his society for this reason. The penalty, unfortunately, is paid by the poor girl who is made to marry Kshetrapati, the headman of the village and a widower. The inhuman event is presented in a dispassionate and cold journalistic style. The story-teller, Sadananda, numbed by the nonsense, remarks, "I realise, a real drama of life has been enacted here. I am not sure, however, if it is a tragedy or a comedy."

Nil Lohit's romantic affair with Malasri, a beautiful and talented girl, is the subject matter of the story 'Nil Lohiter Swayambar'. Nil Lohit is asked by Malasri to be present in disguise at the ceremony her father has arranged for her to choose her husband. Nil Lohit naturally obliges. Malasri takes no notice of other suitors and goes straight to the disguised Nil Lohit and puts the garland round his neck. The marriage, even then, does not materialise because Malasri cannot believe Nil Lohit when he says he has no other wife. He has told her father just the opposite. A romance is broken up. Actually he is a bachelor and wishes to remain one.

The story 'Binabai' (1937) is Ghosal's fabrication. This piece, incidentally, the like of which Bengali literature has few, was written towards the closing years of Pramatha Chaudhuri's literary career. It drew compliments from Rabindranath who said, "Bravo! An excellent production, possible only from your pen." (*Chithi Patra*—Vol. V.)

Ghosal enjoys success as a musician when he moves the Raja of Surpur with his songs. So he gets shelter in his court. The mystery of his success can be traced to a highly

gifted woman, Binabai, foster-daughter of the King's court-musician, Ramkumar Misra. The Goddess of Learning incarnate, she is Ghosal's teacher of music. At the very first sight of her Ghosal exclaims, "Elegantly slim, past her youth, clad in white, she sits with the veena on her lap, looking like Saraswati herself, made not of stone but of human flesh and blood." The teacher and the taught come gradually close together. A new phase—the final phase—in Bina's life commences in Kashi when her past is slowly unfolded. Ghosal's account of Binabai depicts in a fascinating manner how love and music combined to bring tragedy to her life. An aristocratic young girl, Bina, has a passion for music. She came under the hypnotic influence of her music teacher who was a disguised terrorist. Elopement with him turned her into stone. She did not marry him or yield to him. A court musician became her foster-father and trained her in classical music. After his death she took to music as an independent profession and won fame but she never surrendered to anybody. A chance meeting with her brother and mother-in-law made her wish for death. She died in the presence of the narrator after declaring her love for him. This love had turned her again into a woman of flesh and blood.

Whatever qualities Pramatha Chaudhuri displayed in his short stories are epitomised in 'Binabai'. In an incredibly dispassionate manner but never forsaking art, he relates the tragedy in Binabai's life, demonstrating the superb craftsman he was in concealing art.

The story 'Ahuti' symbolises the tragic termination of human life through the tale of the rise and fall of a once flourishing estate, Rudrapur. The place forms the backdrop of the story of a grim murder perpetrated years ago. How the only child of Rani Ratnamayi is killed and how she, in return, takes her revenge, is told with such amazing fusion of thrill and suspense that readers cannot but sit up quickly to sympathise with the Rani but never get a chance to shed tears for her. One may be inclined to call 'Ahuti' an epic condensed into a short story because all the elements of an epic are present in it. Against the background of Rudrapur's ruins and the reddish sky of the dying day, 'Ahuti' portrays the clash of aristocracy



with simple rustics. It leads to a conflict between two opposing forces with contradictory beliefs.

Pramatha wrote in a light vein on various subjects dealing with ghosts and magic adventures and social events, theatre and romance. But his best stories are all tragic and the reason is not far to seek. Their architect was a genuine lover of humanity who turned to the world of dreams in preference to stark reality and did not hesitate a moment to lose himself in flights of imagination and fancy.

Nil Lohit's adventures justify the statement that Pramatha preferred the truth of imagination to the truth of facts. The story of Nil Lohit's robbery entitled 'Nil Lohit' (1922) illustrates this point:

Nil Lohit with his gang raid the house of an affluent merchant in North Bengal and commit dacoity. When thousands of village people surround the house, Nil Lohit manages to escape through the backdoor in the disguise of a servant. Chased later by the villagers, he runs a distance of ten miles. He finds a grazing pony which he uses to travel three more miles to a large lake. With the pursuing multitude behind him, Nil Lohit decides on the only course open to him. He jumps into the lake, covering the first mile by underwater swimming, the second by regular strokes and the third by swimming on his back. It is morning when he reaches the other side. Totally exhausted, he notices a thatched hut. He knocks at the door and it is opened. There stands, Nil Lohit notices to his utter amazement, an exquisitely beautiful woman in a white sari with the signs of a Vaishnavite on her person. It is clear to Nil Lohit that the woman belongs to the Vaishnava sect and lives there alone. Hearing his pitiable plight, the woman breaks into tears and immediately falls in love with him. Later he dresses himself up as a woman and together they go about begging alms. They finally reach Brindaban. After some time, when the police inquiry stops, Nil Lohit returns, leaving his weeping partner to her fate.

The story of Nil Lohit's romantic exploit gains such wide currency that eventually it reaches the police who lose no time in arresting him. He poses a problem to the police though. Except for his verbal testimony there is no other positive evidence to

prove his guilt. A police enquiry reveals eventually that the village supposed to have been the locale of Nil Lohit's dacoity does not exist in North Bengal, nor is there any trace of the merchant whose house is alleged to have been raided. Even the day of the crime mentioned by Nil Lohit was a day without a single dacoity in the whole of Bengal. It is further known that Nil Lohit has never stepped out of his own city, Calcutta. The police find in him an unabashed liar and let him off with the warning, "Go back home. Don't lie again."

The writer concludes the story thus:

"From then on, Nil Lohit stopped telling fictitious stories. As a result, he could not tell any story at all for the plain reason that nothing, in fact, had happened in his life, barring the police custody, which was worth recounting. His genius as a yarn-spinner vanished altogether. May I tell you the truth? Nil Lohit did not tell lies because he was not interested in that game. Completely indifferent to wealth, prestige or social status, he lived in the world of his own imagination. And so whatever stories he told were true of that dream-world. In fact, his only pleasure was in roaming freely in the realm of imagination. As soon as he was dragged down to the matter-of-fact earth, his genius got lost."

This indeed is the keynote of Pramatha Chaudhuri's short stories. The truth one finds in his stories is, in fact, the reality of an imaginary world.



## 7. Essays on Art and Culture

Beauty perceptible through the sense organs was extolled by Pramatha Chaudhuri. In the shaping of this view two important events in the early part of his life played a significant role. Acknowledging his debt to Rabindranath and his elder brother Asutosh, he recalled in his *Atma Katha*:

"My life and my mind took a new course when I returned to Calcutta with my brother. For the first time I read Rossetti, Swinburne and many others in the books he brought from England. At the same time, I had my introduction to pre-Raphaelite art. An aesthetic aroma pervaded my brother's household."

The second factor which made him beauty-conscious was his acquaintance with the Tagore family through his brother. "Grace and charm in men and things around," Pramatha said, "always attracted me." The third element that shaped his mental make-up was his love for literature which, of course, is the essence of all his writings.

Sensual appreciation of beauty was no new philosophy. Pramatha Chaudhuri gleaned examples galore to show that people even in the Middle Ages were its protagonists. By citing history, he showed that to deny the fact of sensuous enjoyment is to deny life itself. The contemporary craze, he diagnosed, was to run after the mirage of non-existent and abstract form or to be involved in carnal pleasures. Rejecting both, Pramatha Chaudhuri advocated a religious adoration of aesthetic qualities which, in turn, would lead us to light. That was, to him, another form of the invocation of eternal youth and of an emancipated life.

Pramatha Chaudhuri, pained to find life around him dull and drab with no feeling for music or colour, had some pertinent observations to make:

"As in science, so in art, the object of study is the world outside. Anything that cannot be felt through the senses is rejected by science. Art likewise should discard it. What we gather through our sense organs is given various shapes by our mind. The element of an object that passes into us is called

its aesthetic quality and the faculty of the mind that receives it is known as that aesthetic faculty." (*Tel Nun Lakri*, 1905.)

In the essay 'Ruper Katha' (1916), Pramatha presented his views on aesthetics with great emphasis. Clear and direct, he said:

"That every object has an aesthetic quality is not a hearsay, it is proved by perception. Anyone with inquiring eyes must have had this experience at one time or another. Those who miss it are indeed unfortunate because to them beauty is abstract and ethereal."

He also mentions that sense-based beauty was the creed of ancient Greece, Italy and India, and of modern Europe, China and Japan. By disowning it, we will be turning away from life. It is an eternal truism that civilization and aesthetic values are closely linked up together.

In support of this argument Pramatha very cogently said:

"The appreciation and assimilation of beauty prolongs the youth of the mind, the static body notwithstanding. If morality is the preface of life, the aesthetic faculty is its concluding chapter."

The criterion of a civilised society to Pramatha Chaudhuri is the extent of its love for beauty and aesthetic finesse. A society denied this gift is an anachronism. To quote him: "By birth, we belong to a region of sensuous satisfaction. A journey to the world of beauty is, therefore, an ascent and not a fall. . . . If, at all, we are so ill-fated that we cannot lead an elegant life, let us pray for an elegant exist at least" ('Ruper Katha'). That Pramatha stood solidly for a meaningful life made lovelier by grace, charm and embellishment was amply demonstrated in most of his essays, sonnets, and short stories.

The two essays, 'Chitrangada' (1927) and 'Kadambari' (1936), offer excellent examples of Pramatha Chaudhuri's deep aesthetic sense. Discussing Tagore's drama *Chitrangada*, written in 1892, Pramatha observed that Rabindranath had created a world of beauty in which *Chitrangada* was an image—a reality in the realm of beauty. Rabindranath's artistic brilliance, Pramatha commented, lay in his making *Chitrangada* a dream personified, independent of any historical context. Art, according to Pramatha, is the realisation of the waking



dream of the human mind, given expression in painting or music. And who else of the contemporary age but Rabindranath could claim such mastery over this technique? There he and Kalidasa are in enviable company.

Similarly, Pramatha's eulogy of Banabhatta as a poet and composer of *Kadambari* exhibits once again his appreciation of aesthetic elegance. He describes *Kadambari* as an exquisitely made garland, the fragrance of which travelled far and wide. Giving Banabhatta the epithet of a creator of beauty, Pramatha draws attention to the excellence of his word-pictures, portraits and landscapes, and says:

"When depicting the beauty of woman, Banabhatta is at his best. In fact, the dream he saw and made us see is a dream of fair women. Tennyson never dreamt of any beauty nor did he introduce 'Fair Women'. His women are all drawn from history, notable names but not 'Fair Women'. Helen is an image in alabaster, Cleopatra has dark eyes. And that is all. Banabhatta's 'Fair Women' are living images of the aesthetic world. Banabhatta was an admirer of their grace and charm and was least concerned with the contours of their body." Patralekha, a secondary character of *Kadambari*, Pramatha pointed out, "is a denizen of the dream world, a woman of eternal youth". Patralekha was hallowed by Pramatha in a sonnet.

Human civilization, in Pramatha Chaudhuri's view, is an important, if not the chief, asset of art because on its proper development depends the fulfilment of human life. A close look at his essays on civilization and culture reveals that he did not accept everything that passed for the latest. For example, democracy, nationalism, militarism or jingoism found no echo in his heart. What then was his concept of civilization? He made a deep and searching probe to find an answer to the question for himself and finally arrived at the conclusion that a refined taste and an aesthetic sense formed the crux of civilization. To quote him:

"It is difficult to answer in a nutshell, what civilization is. Through all ages and climes, civilization has changed its form and character. The significant point, however, is that civilization, at no time in history, is pure and unpolluted.

A French writer made the cynical comment that any attempt to elevate mankind was bound to fail. I do not subscribe to this view and strongly believe that even if we cannot pull man up, we can at least polish his personality." ('Boi Pada', Reading Books, 1918.)

On courteousness and culture Pramatha Chaudhuri set a high premium in assessing social values. He begged of us to concentrate on one and only virtue—a cultured intellect. "A polished taste, an alert mind, a restrained tongue, and modest manners have always won friends and will do so for ever. They ennoble a society, if not enrich it." (Ibid.) He regretted that these values, so honoured in the past, were not being sincerely practised in the present age. "The reason," he tried to point out, "is that the past civilization was aristocratic, and the present one is heading towards a democratic form. The soul of today's democracy decries and defies art, possibly for the reason that the stamp of aristocracy is indelibly imprinted on art. But democracy should do well to remember that the common man is so steeped in his daily life that he is naturally drawn towards materialism and his emancipation cannot come without the aid of art." (Ibid.)

In the concluding portion of his discourse on art and culture, Pramatha wants Bengalis to adopt the ideals of Greek civilization as their goal of life. "The unique feature of Greek culture was that though democratic on the political plane, it was aristocratic on the mental plane. Greek literature thus held a supreme position. Soul and sublimity are not warring elements but are so intimately integrated that any attempt to separate them will prove futile." (Ibid.)

Pramatha Chaudhuri indicated the Greek way for us because he was convinced that in Bengali life art and mind must mingle together. He also advised the cultivation of courtesy and culture in our daily life, for which, as he suggested, we must shake off a sensual mentality and walk in an elegant manner in the world of beauty.



## 8. His Place in the Renaissance of Bengal

Pramatha Chaudhuri wielded his pen from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the close of the second World War, a period of fifty years. His distinctiveness of style and thought are evident in every area of literature he covered.

What indeed was his contribution to the Renaissance movement in Bengal? Did he represent an age? Did he give us any new values of life?

As we answer these questions, we shall in the process portray his personality. There is no denying the fact that he did not herald an age in the way Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath did. In its attitude to life and letters the age of Bankim Chandra was marked by a rigid standard of human values and a sense of high seriousness. Bankim Chandra urged Bengalis to dedicate themselves to patriotism, social welfare and character-building with a sincere zeal.

The age of Tagore saw the rise of a new set of values—*aesthetic awareness, universalism and a free mind*. These are to be seen in Tagore's *Sonar Tari*, *Chitra*, *Galpa Guchchha* and *Chokher Bali*.

It has to be admitted that Pramatha did not preach anything. Moreover, he was not the kind of social and intellectual leader which Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath were. Hence, we do not hear of a "Pramathean Age".

Wherein then lay his key to success?

Around the fifties of the last century, the *Tattvabodhini Patrika* established a pattern for social and literary leaders. The style adopted for essays published in the journal reflected the seriousness of their subjects. These were social uplift, religion, philosophy, history and sociology in its abstract form. All of them adopted a prose form—disciplined, organized, chiselled, unambiguous and free of figurative expressions. From Akshoy Kumar Dutta and Bankim Chandra to Swami Vivekananda and Sivanath Shastri these writer-reformers presented a comprehensive picture of problems of the day and advocated ideals to be followed in order to overcome them. They all, however, stood for collectivism or the general good of the

community. Ramendrasundar Trivedi, the last of the nineteenth century school of thinkers, appeared on the scene at the turn of the century and could not escape the infection of the cult of individualism. Though aware of the intellectual revolution that had taken place in Europe, Ramendrasundar could neither reject Darwin and Spencer altogether nor accept Bergson wholeheartedly. It was left to Pramatha Chaudhuri to bring in Bergson lock, stock and barrel and initiate a new trend of thought in Bengali literature. He called Bergson his philosopher-preceptor.

Bergson thought that "The Universe is a great individual akin to ourselves", that the innate strength of the universal mind is eternally regulating creation and is helping the flow of life to move on. The soul force of youth and of life inspired Pramatha Chaudhuri. He discovered the youth of his imagination in Bergson and borrowed it for Bengali literature.

To what extent Pramatha Chaudhuri advocated Bergson's theory of *élan vital* will be noticed in his *Sabuj Patra* manifesto:

- The full-grown leaf can never go back to its early form as life cannot retrace its steps. Going ahead is its religion, its goal—sublimity or death. The truth is that youth cannot be deceived by manipulating the hands of the clock. *Sabuj Patra*, 1914.)
- Whether we are going forward or backward, we are moving. We can never be stationary. Europe has given us the impetus to move on. We have partially got over our mental and physical inertia. ('*Sabuj Patra* Mukhapatra', 1914.)
- The deep significance of life may not be clear to many of us but its main sign is so obvious, so clear, that it cannot escape notice. And that is its state of wakefulness. Sleep is another name for death. (Ibid.)
- I strongly believe all attempts to prove that life was born of a different element have proved futile. It follows, therefore, that life also will never be converted into any other element. The moment we accept 'vital force' as an independent power, we disclaim attempts to trace the origin. (Ibid.)



In the above context, Pramatha Chaudhuri was indeed a vitalist and his philosophy can be called vitalism. He believed that our goal was to get out of mental stupor, to emerge into the world of emancipation—social, physical and political. With this advocacy of the free mind, he departed from the thought-pattern of nineteenth century intellectuals and simultaneously dissociated from utilitarianism and positivism. He was thus an individualist.

He ushered his 'individual' into literature with a big bang. The 'Birbali' style of Pramatha Chaudhuri was unprecedented for its colloquialism of course, but even more as the projection of a proud 'individual'. True, the 'individual' received his recognition first from Rabindranath, but Pramatha made him an aggressive personality. By frequently using 'I' and 'we' in his writings, he tried to convey that "an individual must express himself through literature". (*Sabuj Patrer Mukhapatra*, 1914.) In the same article, he says, "One who is a conformist has nothing to offer. A conflict always wakes up a dormant mind. It is to this awakened state of mind that all literary and scientific creations owe their origin."

In his thought and writing, Pramatha always kept the thrill of conflict alive. Analysing his influence on Bengali literature Atul Chandra Gupta wrote:

"Pramatha Chaudhuri's articles in *Sabuj Patra* presented an amazing parade of words and their deployment captivated readers. Knowingly or unknowingly, many writers of his time were influenced by him and their number has gradually increased. Introduction of the spoken language in literature for which he fought and won was Pramatha Chaudhuri's legacy to Bengali literature.

"Bengali literature today is more organised, lively, and adept in expressing intricate matters than what it was in pre-Pramatha days. For this, all credit goes to Pramatha. He revolutionised both language and style. That he will be gratefully remembered by succeeding generations will be no solace if, in the course of time, his scintillating style outshines the contents of his writing. In a clear and forthright manner, Pramatha pleaded for the freedom of life and letters, the necessity for which will exist through the ages, but its need is perhaps more pronounced

now than ever before." (Preface to the collection of Pramatha Chaudhuri's Essays, Vol. I, 1952.)

Where indeed is Pramatha's place in Bengali literature? The answer was given by Rabindranath himself in the following words:

"I often look for a person who can pit his judgement even in literature against mine. The man who comes uppermost in my mind is Pramatha Chaudhuri. His preeminence in my thought may be due to the debt I owe him. One should be proud to acknowledge a literary debt—it demonstrates the ability of the borrower. I have scant regard for those who, for a considerable time, either fail to borrow or do not acknowledge it. The quality in him which has attracted me most is the unassuming aristocracy of his mind. This finds expression in his intellectually chiselled writings. I also admire how mentally alive he is. I have often wondered therefore, why he should not drive the chariot of literature and steer it clear of filth and dirt." (Letter to Nanda Gopal Sen Gupta, 1940, published in Sen Gupta's book, *Bangla Sahityer Bhumika*.)

We believe, as we close this discourse, that Bengali literature will continue striving for intellectual independence and mental emancipation, following in the footsteps of Pramatha Chaudhuri.



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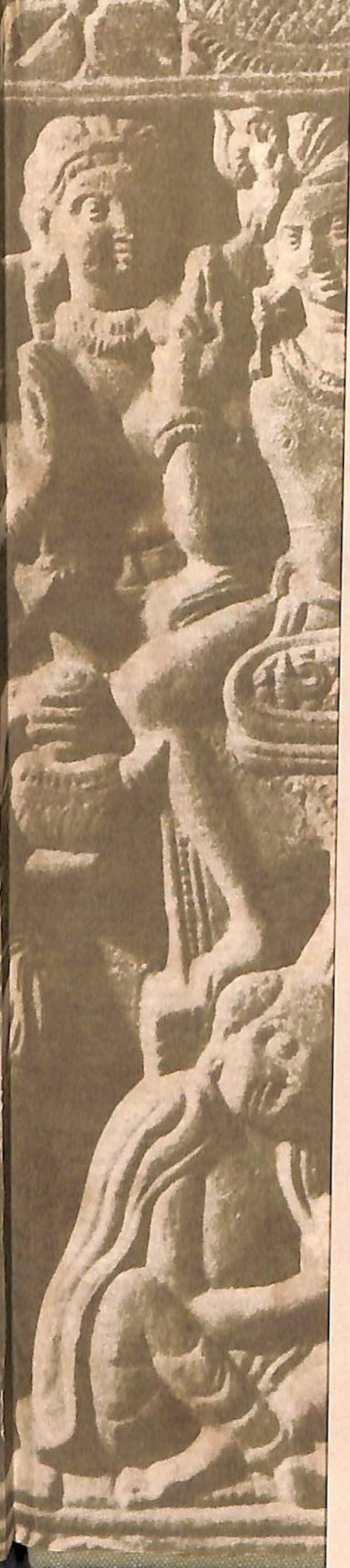
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